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The creation of legitimacy in grassroots organisations: A study of Dutch community-supported agriculture



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ABSTRACT

Grassroots initiatives for sustainable development are blossoming, offering localised alternatives for a range of societal functions including food and energy. Research into grassroots organisations often recognises the difficulties grassroots groups face to continue operations. However, there is a need for better understanding dynamics that enable or constrain grassroots organisational survival. Here, we specifically shed light on how such survival is dependent on the organisation's ability to construct legitimacy. In the context of community supported agriculture (CSA), we explore different legitimacy types and strategies. We learned that CSAs predominantly work to garner legitimacy from their members and that survival seems associated with social capital building. In addition, we observed a moralisation of food provision that describes why new and possibly inconvenient terms of exchange still amass legitimacy. As external audiences remain at a distance, they often misunderstand CSA, their deliverables and impacts on social welfare.

1. Introduction

Global societal challenges, such as climate change and food security, emphasise the need for more sustainable modes of production and consumption in various sectors. There is still a strong bias towards market-driven technological innovation in sustainable development, however the potential of grassroots initiatives in re-shaping unsustainable practices is increasingly being acknowledged (Hermans et al., 2016; Ornetzeder and Rohrer, 2013; Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Seyfang et al., 2014; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2016). Grassroots organisations, it is argued, involve committed activists experimenting with “novel, bottom-up solutions for sustainable development; solutions that respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved” (Seyfang and Smith, 2007:585). Examples of such localised, ‘do-it-ourselves’ solutions to sustainability range from civic energy communities (Hargreaves et al., 2013; de Vries et al., 2016) to sustainable housing projects and eco-villages (Boyer, 2015; Seyfang, 2010); community currency (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013); local food communities (Grasseni, 2014; Kirwan et al., 2013) and makerspaces (Smith, 2017). Although these communities are thematically diverse, they share very similar characteristics and confront similar fundamental challenges (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2014). Rooted in a discontent with, or disbelief in conventional systems of provision, grassroots organisations typically provide protected spaces, or niches, that shelter alternative forms of social and economic life (Hargreaves et al., 2013; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2016). In their position outside the mainstream economy, grassroots communities offer “visions of radical transition pathways and mobilise marginalised values, organisational forms and institutional logics” (Martin et al., 2015:6). For example, local food networks oppose ‘big food’ developments and aim to re-connect farmers and consumers; and re-localise food production through innovative re-organisations of the food supply chain

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(Hermans et al., 2016; Levidow, 2015; Roep and Wiskerke, 2012).

Research on grassroots niches to date often applies a socio-technical transition perspective to study advancements of grassroots organisations and their influence on wider unsustainable systems (Hargreaves et al., 2013; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013). In this body of literature, grassroots organisations are conceptualised as initiators of alternative pathways of innovation that may provide the necessary radical and integrated socio-technical changes to solve environmental and social problems. Although this asserts that grassroots communities need to scale-up and diffuse, the literature studying grassroots developments acknowledges that many grassroots groups have no ambition to grow and rather see their aim in providing benefits locally (Ornetzeder and Rohrer, 2013; Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Smith et al., 2014). Nonetheless, sustaining grassroots organisations appears to be challenging, and grassroots groups frequently face difficulties in running their initiative. Grassroots groups are often fragile as they depend on voluntary work and rely on generosity and trust between strangers (Martin and Upham, 2016; Martiskainen, 2017; White and Stirling, 2013). In addition, those running the initiative generally have limited power and lack sufficient resources necessary to make the initiative viable (Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010). Grassroots groups need to raise monetary support, secure permission to operate and attract members (Kalkbrenner and Roosen, 2016; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013; Smith and Stirling, 2017). Throughout, they must safeguard commitment and solidarity of their members and gain support from actors outside the community as “there is a limit to how much groups can achieve on their own” (Seyfang et al., 2013:988). Then again, resource acquisition and membership retention are likely to be difficult due to the organisation’s position outside the mainstream (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994; Geels, 2010; Walker and McCarthy, 2010). Operating in niches, grassroots communities initially suffer from a ‘liability of newness’, and their activities may be perceived as “strange’, ‘inappropriate’ or ‘out of place’” (Geels, 2010:506).

Prior literature in organisational sociology and management studies has offered various arguments for the effect of organisational activities on overcoming the liability of newness and stimulating the survival of new ventures (Delmar and Shane, 2004). We draw from these fields and focus on legitimacy, which this literature perceives as a crucial factor in organisational survival (Suchman, 1995; Tolbert and Zucker, 1983; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). In attempt to avoid falling victim to the liabilities of newness, new ventures need to construct legitimacy in a deliberate and goal-oriented way (Deephouse et al., 2017). Here, legitimacy describes the credibility of an organisation and its activities and is perceived a *sine qua non* to mobilise resources and acquire support necessary to survive. Legitimacy, therefore, leads to a belief that the grassroots organisation, bringing something new to the sector, may be a desirable and appropriate alternative to incumbent substitutes (Hassink et al., 2018; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). As such, this research supports the perception that organisations that deliberately try to enhance their legitimacy, may be effective in decreasing their risk of failure (Drori and Honig, 2013; Walker and McCarthy, 2010; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). Hitherto, how grassroots organisations go about establishing legitimacy to support new activities is little understood (Hassink et al., 2018).

Our research, then, aims to explore legitimisation efforts in the grassroots realm. The case of community supported agriculture (CSA) in the Netherlands is presented to illustrate in what ways grassroots entrepreneurs, operating in niches, create legitimacy. CSA refers to a partnership between one or more farmers and a community of members (Balázs et al., 2016). It proposes a novel business model that advocates “local and communal stewardship of land through jointly growing food, investing in and managing space, and the redistribution of risk between growers and consumers” (White and Stirling, 2013:3). Whilst CSA has historically been a key component in the local food experience in countries such as the United States (Brown and Miller, 2008; Nost, 2014) and Italy (Brunori et al., 2012; Grasseni, 2014), it is a rather recent, yet emerging phenomenon in the Netherlands. To date¹, only 37 Dutch CSA initiatives are known of which most are in their early stages of development. As new ventures often lack the taken for grantedness that established organisations do possess, they need to create legitimacy to garner resources and support (Delmar and Shane, 2004). The Netherlands is a region that is highly integrated in global food markets, where food production systems develop along the lines of modernisation and within conventional market structures (Renting et al., 2003). Given that pathways for productive efficiency and global economic competitiveness are preferred, CSA entrepreneurs need to convince (potential) members, policy makers, the broader agro-food sector and other interest groups of the desirability and necessity of their new and ‘alternative’ to ‘conventional’ ways of food provisioning. In pursuance of the paper’s aim, we provide a detailed account of legitimacy creation in Dutch CSAs posing the following research questions: What type of legitimacy do CSAs seek and what legitimisation strategies are used to acquire these types of legitimacy?

The outline of the paper is as follows: Section 2 discusses the theoretical background of legitimacy types and legitimisation strategies. Section 3 presents the selected case and the methodology. Next, Sections 4 and 5 respectively describe and analyse legitimisation of Dutch CSAs. Finally, Section 6 discusses the work and draws concluding remarks on grassroots organisational survival and the creation of legitimacy. Additionally, the concluding section puts forward future research priorities.

2. Theoretical background

The theoretical roots of this paper draw on the concept of legitimacy that describes the credibility of an organisation and its activities. Legitimacy is defined by Suchman (1995) as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate with some socially constructed system of norms, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman, 1995:574). Scott (1995) asserts that “legitimacy is not a commodity to be possessed or exchanged but a condition reflecting cultural alignment, normative support and consonance with relevant rules or laws” (Scott, 1995:45). Legitimacy itself is a fundamentally subjective and normative concept. Ultimately, it constitutes a constructed meaning of observers to the organisation ‘as they see it’ (Suchman, 1995;

¹ As of April 2017



Fig. 1. Legitimation process based on Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002:415).

Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002).

Since legitimacy is a matter of perception, it can also be shaped and influenced. Therefore, as argued by various organisational sociology scholars (inter alia Aldrich and Fiol, 1994; Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002), legitimacy should be regarded as an operational resource, which can be acquired from the organisation's environment. As such, organisations can actively seek legitimation through 'achievement' strategies (Cashore, 2002). Drori and Honig (2013) conceptualise legitimacy creation as "the intentional engagement of social actors in specific practices that may lead to achieving legitimacy [...], either with internal or external stakeholders (Drori and Honig, 2013:349). Subsequently, such a strategic take on legitimacy is relevant for entrepreneurs as it emphasises how conscious actions garner societal support. An example is the work of Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002), who describe the legitimation as a process or set of actions by which actors strive to obtain legitimacy for organisational survival (Fig. 1). In essence, legitimate organisations have better access to strategic resources such as financial capital; quality managers and employees; technologies; and government support, which, in turn, also promote survival (Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). In particular, organisations that initiate new activities face difficulties, as they lack the legitimacy essential to convince resource-holding parties to back their organisational efforts: "with no external evidence, why should potential trusting parties "trust" an entrepreneur's claims that a relationship will work out, given that an entrepreneur may be no more than ill-fated fool?" (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994:650). As such, legitimacy can be perceived an 'antidote' for the organisation's 'liability of newness' (Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002)

More recently, innovation scholars have also embraced the legitimacy concept and conceptualise legitimacy creation as one of the key functions that needs to be fulfilled for radical innovations to gain momentum (e.g. Hekkert et al., 2007). According to Markard et al. (2016), an innovation that is "well understood, compatible with established practices, socially accepted and perhaps even endorsed by regulation, possesses a high degree of legitimacy. Conversely, if there are conflicts and institutional misalignment, its development may be hampered" (Markard et al., 2016:330). In line with Zimmerman and Zeitz (2002), innovation scholars conclude that any innovation needs to be considered worthy by relevant actors to mobilise resources, create demand and acquire (political) support (Bergek et al., 2008; Geels and Verhees, 2011; Markard et al., 2016).

This paper starts from the assertion that entrepreneurs play an important role in assuring that their innovation or organisation is evaluated as a desirable and appropriate alternative to incumbent substitutes. As such, the desired state is to be perceived legitimate for resources, necessary for organisational survival, to be mobilised. In particular, we explore the process of legitimacy creation. As illustrated in Fig. 1, we presume legitimacy types and legitimacy strategies to be important in achieving such status.

2.1. Legitimacy types

The evaluation whether an organisation or innovation is legitimate can be based upon different legitimacy sources (Deephouse et al., 2017; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). In prior literature, several delineations of the legitimacy concept have been proposed. For example, Aldrich and Fiol (1994) distinguish among cognitive and socio-political legitimacy. Cognitive legitimacy refers to whether the activity is known, understood or taken-for-granted. Socio-political legitimation refers to the process by which key actors "accept a venture as appropriate or right, given existing norms and laws" (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994:648). In reaction, Hunt and Aldrich (1996) advocate to split socio-political into a regulatory and a normative-based category. Scott (1995) proposes a similar framework including the three pillars of the external environment from which legitimacy may be derived: regulatory, normative and cognitive. Suchman (1995) translates (socio-political) normative and regulatory legitimacy into a value-oriented moral legitimacy, which asks whether the activity is 'the right thing to do'. Moreover, he introduces pragmatic legitimacy – an interest-based variant of legitimacy. Later studies on legitimacy creation (e.g. Cashore, 2002; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002) usually comply with Suchman's three analytical categories of legitimacy:

- I **Pragmatic** legitimacy – Whether the activity has expected value based on the self-interest of a specific audience.
- II **Moral** legitimacy – Whether the activity is the right thing to do, based on:
 - a ... a wider normative system of norms, values and beliefs (i.e. normative).
 - b ... laws and regulations (i.e. regulatory).
- III **Cognitive** legitimacy – Whether the activity is known, understood or taken for granted.

Pragmatic legitimacy is the most straightforward type of legitimacy i.e.: support for an organisation is given based on self-interested calculations of an organisation's expected value to the audience who is conveying legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). As such, for an organisation to achieve pragmatic legitimacy, it must meet the instrumental needs of its audience(s) (Tost, 2011). Following Cashore (2002) "[pragmatic] legitimacy granting rests on some type of exchange between the grantor and the grantee that affects the audience well-being, giving it a direct benefit" (Cashore, 2002:517). Hence, pragmatic legitimacy predominantly boils down to *exchange legitimacy*, i.e. does the organisation offer specific favourable exchanges? However, Suchman (1995) further points out *influence legitimacy* as another subtype of pragmatic legitimacy. Influence legitimacy is attributed not based on what the organisation

actually does for the audience, but instead on how responsive the organisation is to its larger interests, i.e. is the organisation committed to try and serve your interests? (Suchman, 1995). Hence, the main source of pragmatic legitimacy lies within an organisation's immediate audience, which benefits from the organisation or its activities.

Moral legitimacy does not rest on “judgments about whether a given activity benefits the evaluator but rather on whether the activity is the right thing to do in general” (Suchman, 1995; 579). In particular, it demands activities to respect broader societal institutions – if there are conflicts, innovation development may be hampered (Markard et al., 2016). Scott (1995) describes institutions as the normative and regulative structures of society that provide stability and meaning to social behaviour. In a similar vein, moral legitimacy, as proposed by Suchman, is based on a positive *normative* or *regulatory* evaluation of the organisation and its activities (Cashore, 2002; Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). Normative legitimacy (or socio-political (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994)) is achieved when an organisation gains an appropriate or desirable assessment in terms of visibly endorsing and implementing “the norms and values of society or from a level of the societal environment relevant to the new [organisation]” (Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002:419; Suchman, 1995). Consequently, to access resources, it is important that an organisation addresses the norms and values held by resource-holding parties. Moreover, regulatory legitimacy is a “generalised sense that the new venture is operating according to the letter and the spirit of laws and regulations” (Scott, 1995:418). In particular, governments, credentialing associations, professional bodies and even powerful organisations create such formal rules and standards (Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002).

In general, actions of an organisation can be evaluated according to two sub-types of moral legitimacy: *consequential* and *procedural* moral legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). *Consequential* moral legitimacy refers to the assumption that “organizations should be judged by what they accomplished” (Suchman, 1995:580). These outputs are socially defined and do not exist in a concrete sense (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). For example, it is not the pollution of the agricultural sector but rather the evaluation of such a pollution by its audience. *Procedural* moral legitimacy focuses on an organisation's routines and whether these are socially accepted and just. This type of moral legitimacy is most significant when outputs are hard to measure or when cultural beliefs praise certain methodologies (Suchman, 1995).

In addition to pragmatic interests and moral motivations, organisations can acquire a knowledge-based **cognitive type** of legitimacy. Markard et al. (2016) argue that the cognitive dimension of legitimacy refers to the accepted understanding of an innovation and its purpose. Suchman (1995) describes two sources of cognitive legitimacy: *comprehensibility* and *‘taken-for-grantedness’*. An organisation is comprehensible when the audience understands the organisation's activities (Cashore, 2002). Taken-for-grantedness is achieved when “for things to be otherwise is literally unthinkable” (Suchman, 1995:583). Here, the evaluator does not have to support the organisation, but accepts the organisation or activity as being inevitable: the existence of the organisation is taken for granted.

2.2. Legitimation strategies

Given the importance of legitimation and subsequent legitimacy types for organisations and innovations, scholars have explored means through which entrepreneurs can cultivate legitimacy (Cashore, 2002; Markard et al., 2016; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). The literature describes three ‘legitimation strategies’ by which organisations can pro-actively increase their legitimacy: conforming to the environment, selecting amongst environments, and manipulating the environment.

Conforming to existing environments is the easiest and least strategic way to acquire legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). In its most general form, legitimacy is the social acceptance resulting from adherence to existing norms, values, expectations and definitions (Bergek et al., 2008). Organisations can choose to conform when rules, norms, values, procedures, structures and so on are well established and legit (ibid). An organisation can garner pragmatic legitimacy through conformity by meeting instrumental demands, and moral legitimacy by conforming to altruistic ideas or regulations. Moreover, organisations can acquire cognitive legitimacy by aligning their innovation to established modes or standards (Cashore, 2002; Suchman, 1995). As such, cognitive legitimacy can be achieved through codifying informal procedures (formalisation), or linking activities to external definitions of competence (professionalisation).

If an organisation is reluctant or unable to conform to the existing environment, it can also **select** a favourable environment (market or geographical location) to acquire legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). In particular, this refers to catering a selective group that grants the organisation legitimacy “as it is” without demanding changes. Acquiring pragmatic legitimacy through selection is commonly a matter of market research. Or, as understood by Suchman, an organisation “must identify and attract constituents who value the sorts of exchange that the organisation is equipped to provide” (Suchman, 1995:589). The acquisition of moral legitimacy through selection depends largely on the goals an organisation sets for itself. Cognitive legitimacy can be achieved by selection of e.g. certifications or accepted definitions in communication (Suchman, 1995).

Finally, an organisation can **manipulate** their environments in attempt to acquire legitimacy. This is the most strategic way to garner legitimacy. If an innovation differs substantively from prior practices, then manipulation is a viable strategy (Suchman, 1995). In order to garner a legitimate status, innovators must actively disseminate new explanations of social reality and new ideas of what constitutes legitimate behaviour (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994; Cashore, 2002; Suchman, 1995; Zimmerman and Zeitz, 2002). As such, organisations must work on achieving consistency between the organisation and its environment. Pragmatic legitimacy through manipulation is predominantly achieved by means of advertising i.e. persuading specific audiences to value particular offerings (Suchman, 1995). Manipulating moral grounds is more difficult (Suchman, 1995). Performance demonstrations (e.g. technical success) may establish new grounds for moral legitimacy (ibid). More promising is a collective action of organisations that jointly preach for a morality in which the innovation is evaluated as socially desirable (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994). For example, rules and regulations can be manipulated through (collective) lobbying efforts. Organisations can also acquire cognitive legitimacy through

manipulation (Cashore, 2002; Suchman, 1995). To illustrate, comprehensibility can be promoted through “popularisation” and taken-for-grantedness by means of “standardisation” (Suchman, 1995). In this way, organisations seek to create new myths in society and become institutional entrepreneurs (Aldrich, 2011; Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

3. Methodology

This paper takes a qualitative approach in exploring legitimacy creation in grassroots organisations. Its theoretical roots draw on the characterisation of legitimacy type and legitimation strategy, while its empirical focus is on the case of community supported agriculture (CSA). In particular, we aim to unravel legitimation in Dutch CSAs.

3.1. Case description

The selected grassroots case is community supported agriculture (CSA) in the Netherlands. CSAs are community-based food cooperatives that endeavour to shorten food supply chains thereby re-connecting farmers and consumers (Cone and Myhre, 2000; Flora et al., 2012). A unique feature of CSA is that members purchase shares of the harvest before the start of the growing season and through this they ensure the operating budget of the farmer (Balázs et al., 2016; Brown and Miller, 2008; Cone and Myhre, 2000; Kneafsey et al., 2013). As such, the risks and benefits of farm production are shared collectively within the community. For example, if there is a poor harvest e.g. due to unfavourable weather conditions everyone gets less – not just the farmers. Shares generally cost several hundred euros (Brown and Miller, 2008). In return, members receive a portion of weekly available fresh produce and they have access to the farm. Depending on the organisation of the specific farms, members assist the farmer in several ways e.g. with planting, harvesting and delivering food produce (Cone and Myhre, 2000). Moreover, members can also assist in matters such as organising community activities, making financial decisions for the farm or sending out newsletters (ibid). In some cases, this commitment is expected from them as part of their membership, while other organisational forms imply working with non-member volunteers. In general, CSAs attempt to build social communities around the growing and eating of food (Bloemmen et al., 2015; Kneafsey et al., 2013). Following Balázs et al., (2016), this implies building “reciprocity-based social relations where conventional economic roles (such as producer and consumer) turn to social ones (members of a community) and, consequently, non-price considerations take on greater importance than in conventional market exchanges” (Balázs et al., 2016:101).

CSA was first introduced in the Netherlands in 1996 (Oosterwaarde, 2013). Inspired by experiences in the United States, Jolien Perroti aided the initiation of both the *Oosterwaarde* (1997) and the *Aardvlo* (1998). In the same period, a third Dutch CSA the *Nieuwe ronde* was set-up, modelled on self-harvest farms in England (ibid). Dutch CSA gained momentum around 2012 and within a time-span of 5 years, the sector grew significantly, reaching a total of 37 farms in 2017². Dutch CSA farms are diverse in their design and approach. Most are farmer-initiated and require self-harvest. Some farms work with boxes or bags for delivery of their produce. Depending on the selected distribution model, members can either collect their vegetables at the farm or at private distribution points. Most farmers, however, invite members to visit their farm. Boxes can be collected once a week, while self-harvest farms allow members to come and get their produce multiple times a week at set dates or at one’s convenience. In general, all CSAs grow a large variety of vegetables (> 30). Many also offer herbs and small fruits and some farms offer additional produce such as eggs and flowers. Most CSAs are able to supply during the course of approximately 35 weeks. The majority of Dutch CSA farms are located in highly-urbanised areas such as the Randstad. Compared with other countries, Dutch CSA farms are relatively small, generally having no more than 2 ha of farmland. These small farms are well-suited for self-harvest. The three largest Dutch CSA farms (~ 14 ha) deliver their produce in boxes and are located further away from a city.

In the study of legitimation in grassroots organisations, CSA in the Netherlands represents a ‘critical case study’ (Yin, 2013) as it embodies the characteristic that make the creation of legitimacy indispensable: the organisations involved are young (Delmar and Shane, 2004) and the sector is in its formative years (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994). In addition to difficulties stemming from such a nascent status, CSAs, proposing a fundamentally different mode of food provisioning, need to navigate in an incompatible institutional environment and are, thus, required to have a strong narrative on why they should exist. The Netherlands is globally renowned for its innovative agri-food technology and a beacon of efficient farming practices to other countries. As formal and informal institutions are aligned with these perspectives on agri-food innovation, CSA entrepreneurs need to legitimise their ‘alternative’ to ‘conventional’ mode of food provision to raise capital and support. The uphill battle of Dutch CSAs in acquiring legitimacy should therefore provide us with invaluable information on grassroots organisational survival and the role of grassroots entrepreneurs in assuring such survival.

3.2. Operationalisation and data collection

In trying to understand legitimation in the grassroots realm we distinguish between two main research goals. First, we aim to understand what type of legitimacy is sought by the CSA. This paper focuses on the pragmatic, moral (normative and regulatory) and cognitive types of legitimacy distinction. Second, we explore which legitimation strategies entrepreneurs use i.e. conforming, selecting or manipulating. However, these goals are inevitably related: CSA entrepreneurs need to deploy a certain strategy to garner a certain type of legitimacy.

² A survey was distributed via e-mail to gain contextual information on current Dutch CSA. 29 of the 37 identified Dutch CSAs (2017) completed the survey.

Identification of interviewees for this study was a two-tier process in which purposive sampling of initial interviews was complemented by means of ‘snowball sampling’. During the project, 37 Dutch CSAs were identified, of which 25 agreed to an interview. Subsequently, the CSAs in our sample represented almost 70 percent of the identified Dutch CSA sector (as of 2017). In total, 25 qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted in the course of three months (January–March 2017). On average, each interview took 55 min. While the data gathered from these interviews represent a single point of experience, the collective view of all interviewees allows for the identification of patterns in legitimacy creation (Walker, 1997). As such, no statements regarding specific CSAs were made and all quotes were presented anonymously – all respondents were assigned an A–Y randomly.

3.3. Data analysis

After data collection, the aim was to reveal insights from the collected interview data through the successive process of data reduction, data comparison, drawing conclusions and reflection. Data was prepared for analysis with the use of ‘Nvivo’ coding software. Codes were developed in advance in accordance with the concepts in the operationalisation tables. More specifically, three parent nodes were created, corresponding with each legitimacy type. Subsequently, three child nodes were created for each legitimacy type to store information regarding achievement strategies. As such, an overview of strategic actions of an entrepreneur per legitimacy type was developed.

During the coding process, we remained as close to the data as possible to ensure in-depth understanding of underlying processes of legitimacy creation. Such an ‘interpretivist’ approach helped to grasp the subjective meaning of social actions. Once all interviews had been coded, topic biographies per code were made to examine coherence among respondents i.e. data comparison. Here, all quotations were listed which received the same code. Once in the same place, one can easily look for similar or conflicting opinions, uncover issues or generate new ideas. As such, concepts and emerging patterns of legitimacy creation can be deduced from the interviews. This step is essential for drawing generic conclusions and avoiding theoretical deductions that are distinctive to a specific CSA under study (Yin, 2013). Comparison continues until theoretical saturation was reached. Finally, the reliability of the main findings and conclusions was discussed with two experts, selected based on their experience with CSA in the Netherlands. The next section describes the results which are subsequently analysed in Section 5.

4. Results: legitimacy types and strategies in Dutch CSAs

This section provides insights in the legitimisation process of Dutch community supported agriculture (CSA), with the aim of increasing our wider understanding of grassroots organisational survival. In particular, we describe the different sources upon which legitimacy is granted and actors’ attempts to create legitimacy for their activities. Sections 4.1–4.3 respectively provide insights in pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy and associated legitimisation strategies.

4.1. Pragmatic legitimacy and related strategies

Organisations can garner pragmatic legitimacy through provision of favourable exchanges or by addressing their audience’s larger interests. All studied CSAs have similar terms of exchange: interested members purchase a share (‘subscription’) and in return receive local and fresh produce. Generally, these shares are purchased before the start of the harvesting season. Most Dutch CSAs evolve around self-harvest, a distribution model that requires members to harvest their own produce at the farm. Other CSAs work with boxes (bag, baskets) that can be collected at the farm or a centralised pick-up point. The weekly deliverables are determined by the farmers’ planting decisions, weather impacts, seasonal and local constraints. As such, exchange in CSA differs from conventional food provisioning.

“Some people unsubscribe after the first year as CSA doesn’t suit them. They want to be able to choose their own vegetables. At our farm they have to make do with what they get. For some members this is a burden, for others it is part of the charm as it stimulates creativity”
[Interview Y]

Initially, much of the pragmatic legitimacy is framed on CSA activities aligning with increasing consumer demands regarding the quality, traceability and environmental friendliness of food products and processes. Although the provision of fresh, organic and local produce is an important aspect of the CSA’s continuity, these tangible offers are not the sole nor dominant reason why people convey pragmatic legitimacy to CSAs. Though necessary to survive, CSAs go beyond being mere food suppliers and offer additional benefits to their audience. These immaterial benefits such as ‘being part of a community’; ‘re-connecting with nature’; ‘being outdoors’; and ‘learning about food and farming’ generally ascend the expected value of having access to quality produce and are often mentioned as the prime motivation for member participation. Concurrently, members reportedly join a CSA for reasons other than direct benefits including ‘being part of a transition’; ‘supporting local food/local entrepreneurs’; and ‘doing something positive/useful’.

“At a certain moment we asked our members: why are you a member? Because we want to eat organic vegetables they responded. So, I replied: you can also get organic vegetables at the supermarket. As such, we asked them again: why are you a member? Finally, we discovered why. It is the combined value of being connected to a farm; being able to voice your opinion and the possibility to support a small and local farm that makes them decide to become a member instead of buying organic at the supermarket” [Interview G]

While the decision to participate is often based on the expected value of having access to organic, local and fresh produce, most members continue participations for the social benefits the CSA offers. Many respondents argue that these social benefits have even

shown to make up for poor harvest. In other words, pragmatic legitimacy of the CSA does not decrease in case of poor harvest resulting from unexpected events, such as poor weather conditions or diseases – as long as the social benefits are still in place.

To enhance the pragmatic appreciation of the CSA, respondents indicate the importance of attracting members that value these immaterial exchanges. As such, a selection strategy allows entrepreneurs to increase chances of legitimation. ‘Friendly audiences’ that have been mentioned are for example parents with small children, as CSAs allow them to educate their children on food and farming; people that used to have their own vegetable garden but were forced to stop due to time constraints or physical limitations or and advocates of sustainable lifestyles. In particular, respondents stress the importance of attracting people who are committed to be community members instead of mere food consumers. In turn, this member/consumer dichotomy calls for a clear articulation of what being a member entails.

“Members support your initiative and consumers get what they need. Consumers do not offer support, maybe financially but definitely not when something goes wrong or when help is needed [...] Those who do not understand what it takes to be a member generally leave after a bad year – I am glad they do” [Interview I]

In another example of selection as a strategy, respondents have indicated that being located within or near a city (most preferably reachable by bike) is most favourable as CSAs allow urban dwellers to (re)gain access to the farmland. However, at any location, CSAs need to discover what works within their locality and notice unmet local needs. Moreover, CSAs can decide to select other activities to complement the CSA farm. Complementary functions that have been mentioned are care, education and recreation. Here, CSAs consciously decide to combine two or more functions on the farm to attract new audiences that value the sorts of exchange that the farm offers. As such, multi-functionality of the farm becomes an important aspect to acquire pragmatic legitimacy.

In addition to selection strategies, CSA entrepreneurs may also use ‘manipulation strategies’ to convince audiences to value their exchanges. For example, many inform potential members on the true costs of conventional farming, i.e. estimates of hidden costs to natural environment and human health. Many consumers have become estranged from food and farming and lack an understanding of food pricing. Here the aim is to convince potential members that the financial contribution is not expensive but inevitable for a sustainable food system. Besides education on food pricing, CSAs also explain the appearance of their vegetables and why they look different from regular products in the supermarkets. Aforementioned conceptions of food and food production are strongly embedded in dominant food systems. As such, to safeguard pragmatic legitimacy, respondents argue the importance of explaining, and when necessary, educating their audiences in order to manage expectations.

“We had a very good first season and our members were very positive. The second year was worse and, although disappointing, it allowed me to explain the core elements of CSA. One year you can harvest a lot while other years you must settle with less. But you will always have something to eat – that’s how nature works. That’s what’s wrong with the current food system [Interview I]

In general, respondents argue that the CSA’s immaterial and indirect benefits are especially clear to those members who have a personal connection with the farm. Consequently, apart from being only a farmer, most CSA entrepreneurs also envision themselves as hosts and organise social events that promote relationships and community building. Most of the respondents actively invest in activities/events that support bonding among members their relationship to the farm e.g. recurring harvesting events and on-farm dinners, but also regularly newsletters with personal stories or recipe exchanges. According to the interviews, these additional features of the farm, aside from market-exchange, increase chances of legitimation by CSA members. As such, this exemplifies a ‘manipulation’ strategy.

Along the years of operations, CSA entrepreneurs use a ‘conform’ strategy to safeguard positive evaluations of exchange. CSAs strongly endeavour to listen and consider their member’s needs and desires. These surveys can result in direct pragmatic legitimacy as farmers can consider changes for next year’s cultivation plan or regarding social events. In addition, such built-in mechanisms of feedback and joint-decision making have been argued to increase legitimacy in general. Allowing members to voice their opinions, serves the overall aim of CSAs to involve members in the process. Moreover, as members are part of – and in some cases, have control over processes on the CSA, their understanding on why their desires can or cannot be met, enhances. As such, legitimation seems to grow along with the audiences’ understanding of the CSA. During their membership, members learn a lot about organic farming and the amount of work it entails. For example, they personally experience the effect of weather conditions on crops and become familiar with varieties of vegetable’s size, shape and colours. This makes that pragmatic legitimacy is more durable and CSAs do not have to constantly react to the environment from which it acquires legitimacy. As such, pragmatic legitimacy is associated with confidence and trust in CSA deliverables. Those outside the community, as argued, are more likely to grant pragmatic legitimacy when CSAs prove to be continual and consequently, municipalities, foundations and other parties want to know what is in it for them. Many respondents felt they had to constitute themselves as a serious party within their locality. It seems to take a couple of years for external audiences to understand what favourable exchanges the CSA offers and how its activities adhere to larger interests of e.g. local agenda setting regarding green and social development of the suburbs. In this light, legitimation of CSA activities proves to be more difficult as is the case with CSA members. While aforementioned benefits of CSAs are swiftly understood by members because of their close relation to the farm, these benefits remain largely invisible and misunderstood to external audiences. In particular, social benefits and the societal function of the CSA are valued insufficiently. As an explanation, such immaterial benefits can only be understood by way of experience and prove to be difficult to translate in concrete results. Moreover, CSA entrepreneurs indicate to struggle with initial framings such as ‘romantic’, ‘idealistic’ or ‘adorable’, that need to be challenged continuously in attempt to acquire serious attention from those outside the community. Consequently, many respondents underline the importance of building a good and mature reputation to attract external audiences.

4.2. Moral legitimacy and related strategies

Moral legitimacy entails the evaluation of the CSA and whether it ‘does the right thing’ considering general laws, rules and regulations (regulative) or norms, values and accepted societal routines (normative). Here, legitimation does not reflect whether the CSA benefits the evaluator but rather constitutes a general belief that the CSA promotes societal welfare and complies with broader societal institutions. Our respondents specifically highly value normative moral legitimacy and regulative moral legitimacy seems of limited use in understanding the legitimation process.

4.2.1. Normative moral legitimacy

Moral legitimacy is predominantly derived as the CSA pioneers an alternative economic system that proposes renewed ways of organising, doing and thinking based on increasing important norms and values. For example, sustainability ambitions of Dutch CSA seem to constitute a large part of their moral legitimacy. Audiences value that CSAs ‘grow for real demand thus limit food waste’; ‘employ organic agricultural practice’; ‘restore and recover (farm)-land’ and ‘provide green in the city’. Moreover, respondents mention that socio-economic ambitions of the CSA result in moral appreciation. Amongst others, their audiences generally applaud that the CSA are ‘sheltered environment for volunteers who need extra care’; ‘allows the farmer a fair income and gain independence from formal financial institutes’ and that the CSA ‘teaches children about food production’. In addition, CSAs reportedly conform to other growing societal values. In times of alienation, values such as ‘supporting inclusion’ or ‘bringing people together’ and ‘bridging population groups’ are much appreciated. In another example of moral legitimacy, CSAs are responsive to dynamics of decentralised governance and the participatory society. As a result of dissatisfaction with top-down measures, Dutch citizens increasingly wish to take matters into their own hand and CSAs encourage these citizens to find alternatives to conventional forms of food provisioning.

“People find it compelling that we decided to take matters into our own hands. That we not only criticise conventional practices but actually show that things can be different. In a very concrete way we show that it is possible to have impact.” [Interviewee M]

Finally, CSAs also align to cultural values through growing traditional Dutch and regional varieties of vegetables. Overall, CSAs garner legitimacy as they ‘conform’ to norms and values that have become increasingly important to Dutch citizens.

Next to conforming, interviewees indicate the importance of deciding on a specific vision or goal and staying loyal to the ideals that underline them. Such a ‘selection’ ensures that the CSA appeals to the sentiment of relevant audiences. In line with aforementioned arguments on attracting members instead of consumers, goal-setting also aids expectation management – a CSA is more than a food outlet. During the initiative, most CSAs devote great attention to ensuring that its members have a solid understanding of organisational goals – why are we doing this and what do we want to achieve? It enables the CSA’s audiences to understand moralities behind choices on the farm to allow for a fair evaluation of the CSA’s ‘righteousness’. Many respondents stress that it takes time and effort to create such new moral grounds for evaluation. However, once established, people have a healthier understanding of farm procedures and outcomes.

“You really see that people become more aware of the total picture. For example, multiple members told us that they started to study weather forecasts differently – rain again? That’s bad news for our carrots!” [Interview W]

As argued before, CSA outcomes, which are not seen immediately after the end of the activity, prove to be difficult to translate in concrete results. As a result, it takes several years for actors outside the network to understand what favourable exchanges the CSA offers (pragmatic). In the same vein, respondents indicate that demonstrating success is necessary for external audiences to righteously interpret whether the CSA promotes societal welfare. This seems to negatively affect CSA legitimation as external audiences search for impacts that can be measured objectively e.g. does volunteering at a CSA get people back to work sooner?

In turn, members generally prioritise procedures over tangible deliverables (pragmatic). As such, moral legitimacy in CSAs predominantly arises from visibly endorsing norms and values, deemed important by their direct audience. For instance, CSAs are unlikely to lose legitimacy if they have poor harvest due to e.g. plant diseases. However, the organisation is likely to lose legitimacy when pesticides are used to safeguard production – thereby discarding its ideology.

In general, respondents indicate that members trust them to ‘do the right thing’ and that their actions are authentic. Specific characteristics of CSA seem to facilitate the build-up of trust: approachable farms and farmers; open and transparent communication; and democracy and mutual respect. In particular, these characteristics create honest relationships and allow for self-evaluation regarding how and why things are done at the farm. Characteristically, CSA farms and farmers are accessible and approachable to members as well as external audiences. As a result, procedures on the farm can be experienced and observed directly. Embracing such an open and inviting culture garners moral legitimacy, as one can directly observe farm routines e.g. what type of seed is purchased or how farmland is maintained.

“Members can always visit the farm and watch us while we’re working. They can see exactly what we are doing and how we do it.” [Interview R]

In addition, respondents highlight the importance of open and transparent communication to garner moral legitimacy. As exchange on CSA farms is a continual process between farmer and members, respondents conclude that in order to be perceived legitimate, transparent communication regarding outputs is key. Being honest about what happens on the farm and explaining why things happen, promotes moral legitimacy. This also entails open communication during more challenging times when procedures backfire.

“We explain everything. If for example there are lice in our lettuce because of the drought we explain that they can still eat it but need to wash it in salt water. If we do not explain, and it happens again, people might start to wonder what kind of farmers we are. The funny thing is, if we explain it, people don’t care and have no problem eating it.” [Interview O]

Finally, democracy and mutual respect as core characteristics of a CSA, garner moral legitimacy. Members attain an important position and share responsibility of the farm. They work together with the farmer in a personal and informal manner. Characteristically, CSAs members and farmer share the risks and benefits of farm production which strengthens their relationship and allows for solidarity and mutual respect. Most CSAs have a few basic rules to regulate activities at the farm – trust among members and between the farmers is highly important. For instance, some CSAs completely refrain from communicating the amount of weekly produce per prescription thereby shifting focus to ‘what do I need’ instead of calculating ‘what am I entitled to’.

“Certain crops are limited, such as red cabbage. As a result, we commonly have people asking: how many crops can I have? I never answer that question. I never tell them: you can take home three per person. Because if I would do so, people believe that they are entitled to three pieces even though they don’t feel like eating red cabbage this week.” [Interview K]

Mutual respect also means ‘taking members seriously’ and ‘appreciating their effort’. Many interviewees indicate to include members in the innovation process. For example, most CSAs allow for joint-decision making and organise general assembly meetings that enable members to voice their opinion.

“Our members really appreciate that we give them the opportunity to voice their opinion. Only a few actually come to our meetings but everyone finds it appealing that it is possible, that we openly discuss matters with them.” [Interview X]

4.2.2. Regulative moral legitimacy

In previous, moral legitimacy is normatively evaluated and socially bestowed. Additionally, organisations can acquire regulative moral legitimacy when operating according to the spirit of laws and regulations set by e.g. governments. In general, respondents argue that this type of legitimacy is not particularly relevant to CSAs as there are no set formal rules or standards they must comply to. There is no set definition of what it requires to be a CSA. Concurrently, this allows for CSAs to be creative in how they develop and to be adaptive to their own personality or own locality.

4.3. Cognitive legitimacy and related strategies

Cognitive legitimacy will be bestowed upon organisations or innovations that are understandable rather than considering if they are desirable. CSA is a relatively new phenomenon and rather unfamiliar term in the Netherlands. Respondents experience that, beyond specific circles, CSA still requires extensive explanation. Several reasons for the low societal understanding have been mentioned, among which the absence of an official Dutch CSA network; small number of CSAs in the Netherlands, and farmers being too busy at their own farm to engage in popularisation, have been mentioned most often.

In general, those who understand CSA are personally involved in a CSA. As such, cognition is intuitively established by means of experience. In this light, CSA seems unlikely to acquire a legitimate status purely based on cognition and requires closer evaluation. In a sense, this is precisely what CSA entrepreneurs wish to accomplish, namely, to avoid generalisation and thereby protect authenticity. According to the respondents, the value lies in creating understanding on what their CSA does and, more importantly, why. Being acquainted with the CSA term is less significant.

“They [our members] don’t really need to know the word CSA – that is completely irrelevant. But if they can tell me that our farm is fair, that they understand that they have to pay more to provide a fair income to the farmer, I would like that” [Interview H]

As argued before, CSA entrepreneurs have to cope with the issue of ‘being taken seriously’ and generally need to challenge initial beliefs of amateurism. Respondents mention that by conforming to established standards of competence, legitimacy as derived from external parties potentially grows. For example, they argue, legitimacy may be derived from having a professional look including an attractive and professional website and flyer. Moreover, some CSAs have formally organised themselves in an association or foundation. Such a formalised organisational form shows external audiences that the CSA has the ambition to be durable and thus beneficial for external support and resource mobilisation.

“One of the reasons to set-up an association was the fact that it is a stronger representation towards for example municipalities if you sent the chairman of an association involving hundreds of people.” [Interview E]

In general, miscues and misunderstandings hamper mobilisation of external audiences or at least require promotion of CSA. Promotion is generally limited to local events such as ‘open farm days’ to inform unaware audiences of their existence. Popularisation as a strategy to promote the comprehensibility of CSA is argued to cost a lot of energy – most respondents indicate that their own CSA demands all their time and effort. In addition, absence of an official Dutch CSA network is said to make it more difficult to engage in such activities. In general, respondents encourage the growth of the CSA sector in the Netherlands and are positive towards the upsurge of new initiatives. However, it seems important to be attentive when fundamental norms and values associated with CSA fade in the event of popularisation. Here, respondents underline the importance of protecting authenticity. In addition, popularisation proves to be challenging as no two CSAs are the same and emerging rules and protocols may not be able to capture the breadth of CSA initiatives.

“I am not sure if it would have value if CSA gains popularity. As things get more popular, you always have many initiatives who claim to be it but really aren’t. [Interview O]”

In addition to comprehensibility, respondents were questioned on the ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of CSA, which describes the embedding of CSA in society. Most respondents indicate that CSA and CSA developments in the Netherlands are too premature and that, therefore, this type of legitimacy is highly unlikely to be bestowed on their organisation. However, they do mention to have achieved a significant level of embeddedness in their own locality.

Regarding selection, many of the respondents use similar taken-for-granted definitions to describe their CSA. They use specific words in external communications such as organic; Fairtrade; local; fresh; bonding and self-harvest. These words are familiar and have significance to certain audiences. Furthermore, in order to establish a cognitive base regarding aforementioned member/consumer dichotomy, respondents emphasise words in external communication that accentuate the power of participants such ‘shareholder’; and rather communicate ‘contribution’ instead of price. As such, CSA entrepreneurs use framing tactics to position their CSA.

In another example of selection, some CSAs are certified³ organic (i.e. SKAL) and/or bio-dynamic (i.e. Demeter). Arguments behind certification are ‘additional proof to external audiences that we are organic’; ‘to support and stimulate growth of the organic sector’; ‘to be part of a movement’ and to ‘change the sector from within’. In essence, it is used as a tool to garner legitimacy from audiences outside the community. Contrarily, respondents argue, certification does not garner legitimacy from their members. In general, the integrity of the CSA’s produce is guaranteed by trust because of direct relationships that counteract anonymity. As such, members trust that farmers correctly execute routines and standards associated to organic production methods. This also explains why most of the studied CSAs are uncertified. Respondents that choose to withhold from certification criticise the complexity of the certification process that is associated with high costs, required paperwork and bureaucracy. Furthermore, some respondents argue that their view on sustainability is not compatible with certification standards.

Finally, CSA entrepreneurs can garner cognitive legitimacy through manipulation. In order for audiences to comprehend the CSA and its activities, CSA entrepreneurs seem to intervene in cognitive structures that steer people’s perception of reality. For example, this entails challenging understandings on ‘how vegetables grow’ and ‘the effects of seasons on food production’. As such, this highlights the importance of promoting and creating new knowledge about food and farming – shared within and outside the CSA’s network. Consequently, this strategy resembles previously described manipulation in moral legitimacy to righteously appreciate CSA exchanges.

5. Analysis: the creation of legitimacy in Dutch CSAs

This section builds on our empirical description and provides analytical insights to legitimation in Dutch CSAs.

The legitimation process of CSAs is best described as a ‘value-pragmatic’ process where exchanges are assessed with moral considerations in mind. In particular, normative moral legitimacy and pragmatic legitimacy seem to influence each other. As the result of positive feedback loops, pragmatic appreciation coincides with the assessor’s moral understanding of ways that go beyond economic exchange. As such, a ‘moralisation of food provisioning’ is witnessed. In particular, CSAs go beyond being mere food producers and immaterial benefits, such as ‘being part of a community’ and ‘re-connecting with nature’, and predominantly explain why people join a CSA to have access to organic produce. Concurrently, our empirical description shows that direct experience and involvement are essential to understand and appreciate what the CSA delivers. Moreover, this close relation to the farm allows people to make value-judgements, regarding the desirability of the CSA, based on their own knowledge and personal experience. Subsequently, specific features of CSA, including open communication, authenticity, democracy and approachability facilitate the build-up of trust and stockpile legitimacy.

CSA entrepreneurs pursue different strategies to garner legitimacy from different audiences. These audiences can be roughly divided along two tiers: CSA members (inside) and those outside the CSA’s network. As shown, CSA entrepreneurs predominantly work to gain legitimacy from their members. CSAs largely depend on their member’s involvement to survive due to their role as private investors and all-round volunteers. This type of ‘internal’ legitimacy is supported by conforming to members’ needs and allowing them to have a voice in food production. Ultimately, internal legitimacy is secured through the build-up of social capital i.e. the creation of social networks, building on reciprocity, trust and collective gains.

In relation to addressing different audiences, our research shows that selection is important, addressing the importance of ‘having the right people aboard’. Respondents believe that their initiative requires members, not consumers. This member/consumer dichotomy reflects fundamental differences in being a grassroots member compared to more traditional, passive consumer roles. Concurrently, these new roles require CSA entrepreneurs to inform and educate their (potential) members. The results show that CSA proposes new ‘rules of the game’ underlying food production, which need to be understood to allow for a fair evaluation of the CSA’s desirability. Therefore, audiences should assess the CSA’s activities through a value-pragmatic lens, accepting that exchange entails more than an input-output balance.

Next to members, CSAs also rely on actors outside their community. Amongst others, they need to attract new members to ensure growth or cope with people leaving and might have to gain approval from (local) parties and municipalities. In particular, our

³ Third-party certification systems ensure produce integrity and aim to counteract dishonest trading. Hence, in order to be able to sell to e.g. organic supermarkets or restaurants, food suppliers need to be certified. In practice, as CSAs sell their products to their own members, certification is not obligatory as is the case in conventional food supply.

research illustrates that these external audiences remain at a distance and, as they search for tangible deliverables, misunderstand CSAs (cognitive) and their deliverables (pragmatic) and impacts on social welfare (moral). As such, manipulation as a strategy is frequently mentioned in which CSA entrepreneurs constantly must prove themselves and justify their activities in broader institutional contexts. Finally, we deduce that legitimation of the CSA is farm-specific and we witness little collective and nationwide action in legitimacy creation. All respondents individually engage in strategies to create legitimacy for their farm and there is no overarching organisation that preaches or lobbies on behalf of CSA.

6. Concluding remarks and reflection

This research was designed to shed light on legitimation in the grassroots realm, a process by which grassroots entrepreneurs strive to create legitimacy for their organisation. By unpacking micro-level-dynamics of legitimation in CSA, we targeted to advance scientific understanding of grassroots organisational survival and, more particular, the role of grassroots entrepreneurs in assuring such survival. We started this paper with the argument that organisational survival is not a given fact, as many grassroots entrepreneurs face political, social and economic difficulties in running their initiative (inter alia [Seyfang and Smith, 2007](#)). The case of CSA in the Netherlands nicely illustrates the complexity of legitimation in the grassroots realm and aids in understanding why and how grassroots organisations may gain legitimacy. In this section, we transcend our selected case and interpret our findings and their impacts in light of grassroots initiatives more broadly. We present three main conclusions.

Firstly, grassroots organisational survival seems to be associated with social capital building. In particular, this refers to social networks that consist of lasting relationships marked by reciprocity, trust and cooperation. In accordance with [Kalkbrenner and Roosen \(2016\)](#), our empirical description shows that a sense of community and trust are necessary to achieve a high acceptance of organisational activities. Grassroots entrepreneurs are strongly motivated to invest in the community to secure participation over time and, as such, protect exchanges through mechanisms that support bonding among members and the organisation. Concurrently, grassroots organisations generally embrace an innovation culture based on “democracy, openness, diversity, practical experimentation, social learning and negotiation ([Ornetzeder and Rohrer, 2013:20](#)). Members can easily assess whether the organisation’s activities are just and usually convey legitimacy, based on direct, personal experiences. As a result, grassroots communities become self-sufficient communities where ‘internal legitimacy’ is highly durable, however, distancing those outside the community. This bears resemblance to Putnam’s dimensions of social capital in which he distinguishes between ‘bonding’ capital generated by strong ties, and ‘bridging’ capital consisting of weak ties that complement or make up for loss of strong ties ([Putnam, 2000](#)). As portrayed in our empirical description, miscues and misunderstandings may result in a lack of confidence in grassroots groups and the quality of their deliverables, which hampers mobilisation of external audiences. Therefore, and *secondly*, as the divide between internal and external audiences grows, long-term survival becomes challenging. If grassroots initiatives “wish to endure and be influential, they will need to draw into their negotiations wider interests and commitments” ([Smith and Stirling, 2017:76](#)). Moreover, external sources of support are required to succeed, as challenges regarding time, volunteers, and money are difficult to meet internally ([Seyfang et al., 2013](#)). As such, recent studies on grassroots communities proclaim “there is a limit to how much [grassroots] groups can achieve on their own” ([Seyfang et al., 2013:988](#)). This illustrates the importance of Suchman’s call to focus on legitimation in survival as grassroots entrepreneurs are required to engage in activities that ease external resource mobilisation. In addition, limiting the distance between the community and external audiences may aid external audiences’ appreciation and understanding of grassroots initiatives.

Thirdly, performance indicators of grassroots communities appear to shift away from adhering to investor profits in market innovation and rather emphasise ‘what difference does the organisation make’, thereby acknowledging that legitimacy is granted beyond the expected benefit of a certain grantor-grantee exchange ([Cashore, 2002](#)). As such, ‘favourable exchanges’ ([Suchman, 1995](#)) seem to be assessed with moral considerations in mind i.e. value-based constructs of righteousness. Consequently, people are less inclined to evaluate grassroots communities based on what they deliver in turn for financial contribution, ascending more traditional input-output balances. This aligns with our proposed “moralisation of [...] provisioning”, which describes that new and possibly inconvenient terms of exchange (as compared with dominant systems of provision) still garner pragmatic legitimacy as a result of novel value-propositions. For example, our empirical case draws a compelling picture of CSA members who highly value expected benefits of ‘being outdoors’ and therefore agree with choice restrictions, up-front payment and weekly farm visits. Here, we align with research on consumer culture where consumption choices and behaviour are understood from a social and cultural point of view (as opposed to individual and economic choices). For example, our work aligns with [Thompson and Coskuner-Balli \(2007\)](#) who conclude that unconventional systems of provision such as CSA sustain themselves in increasingly corporate-dominated sphere of food through “a confluence of economic, ideological and cultural factors that leverage anti-globalization sentiments in ways that [...] provide a marketplace resource for consumers to co-produce feelings of enchantment” ([Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007:278](#)). Likewise, the growing number of community energy projects in the Netherlands should be understood in light of normative, structural problems associated with centralised energy systems. For example, members of energy communities assign significance to (re-)gaining control over their energy production whilst coping with pragmatic inconveniences such as unstable supply. In conclusion, grassroots organisational survival thus seems to depend on whether its assessors understand ‘the new rules of the game’. This, in turn, requires grassroots entrepreneurs to intervene in, thus manipulate, cultural structures that steer one’s perception of reality and, more importantly, identify and attract constituents who value these new moralities and associated deliverables the organisation is equipped to provide.

The use of legitimation as a theoretical lens to further scientific understanding on grassroots organisations appears to be useful. The legitimacy concept, borrowed from organisational sociology sheds a new light on entrepreneurial strategies that clarify why and

how grassroots organisations survive. Our study contributes to understanding legitimacy types, presented as distinct concepts in traditional organisational literature, by showing that they appear to be highly integrated and co-dependent in the case of grassroots organisations. We witness a step-wise legitimation process where new moralities need to be understood to ‘righteously’ interpret what grassroots organisations can deliver. In addition, the build-up of legitimacy seems to undergo acceleration as the result of positive feedback loops. As such, focussing on longitudinal patterns and cumulative causations in legitimacy creation may additionally further the understanding of grassroots organisational survival the form of reinforcing ‘motors’ (Suurs, 2009). In our studied grassroots case, we can deduce some evidence on such a ‘legitimacy motor’, assuming that sources of legitimacy vary with respect to the CSA’s development stage. During initiation, CSAs need to position themselves locally and inform unaware audiences. They recruit members who reportedly join for food-related deliverables. During the first years of operation, CSAs focus strongly on ‘internal’ legitimacy to attain long-term relationships with their members. Concurrently, the appreciation of immaterial or social benefits becomes highly important and constitutes as the main source of legitimacy. In particular, in this initiation phase new morals are created for which sympathy grows. Finally, learning and demonstration of success are key in moving towards the maturity phase. As internal legitimacy is safeguarded through farm routines and the build-up of trust and social capital, CSA entrepreneurs find the time to invest in external legitimacy creation. Positive reputation and credibility of the CSA influences broader understanding of the CSA’s (immaterial) benefits and the acknowledgement of societal value by formal authorities. As such, CSAs gain additional support outside their ‘inner circle’. Concisely, it appears more important to invest in the CSA community before external legitimacy and strategic positioning of the organisation is sought.

Finally, we propose several future research directions. Firstly, we suggest a further examination of social networks and the construction of social capital in grassroots organisation as this seems positively correlated with survival. Scaling-up and diffusion potentially question social network conditions such as trust and reciprocity that characterises grassroots organisations (Mount, 2012). Secondly, blossoming of grassroots initiatives with dissonant views on e.g. food or energy provision address the necessity of new performance criteria to grasp the initiative’s multi-dimensional impacts. In a similar vein, Smith and Stirling (2017) recently directed academic attention to more practical questions regarding how to best appreciate and reimburse grassroots entrepreneurs. Next, we prioritise the advancement of a comparative approach on grassroots organisational survival to understand how much legitimation depends on distinct, context conditions. Grassroots initiatives generally address structural problems in conventional systems that may differ across countries or within localities (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). As such, how activities are justified expectedly coincides with ‘what matters to local people’ (ibid). Whilst grassroots initiatives generally endorse similar ideologies, a comparative case study among various countries or sectors is desired to shed light on possible differences in legitimacy creation. For example, as we focused on CSA in the Netherlands, contextual characteristics including the affordability, accessibility and availability of food in the Netherlands as well as its high safety standards for food products arguably affect the legitimation process. These contextual specificities may then explain why pragmatic legitimacy in Dutch CSAs involves social gains rather than accommodating basic needs such as access to safe food. Moreover, as we noticed during the interviews, trigger events such as food scandals and national trends concerning alienation seem to have fostered legitimation of community-driven food initiatives. However, as this paper focuses on entrepreneurial efforts in legitimation, the influence of such external conditions that may foster or hinder legitimation have not been studied explicitly. Future research should endeavour to link such external, landscape factors (see Geels, 2010) to legitimation strategies within niches.

As a final research priority, we encourage researchers to uncover how and why unique characteristics of grassroots organisations demand adjustments to traditional perspectives on innovation and transition. In essence, as these organisations exist outside the frequently studied market-realm, researches should carefully determine whether theoretical frameworks designed to understand corporate-led technological innovations can also be used to further scientific understanding grassroots innovation of civil society.

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