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# The paradox of externally driven localisation: a case study on how local actors manage the contradictory legitimacy requirements of top-down bottom-up aid

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## Abstract

There are ongoing calls in the humanitarian and development sectors to localise aid, make it more participatory and involve communities. A common response to these calls by INGOs and national governments is to work with local actors to jointly deliver local, community-based, participatory aid. However, this setup tends to be hierarchical, with external actors taking the lead on project design and local actors on implementation. As a result, key outcomes envisioned for localisation and participation in aid often do not materialise. This paper explores the role legitimacy work plays in maintaining this unhelpful status quo. To this end, it provides a qualitative case study analysis of an aid project in Ethiopia (2016–2020) that was initiated by two INGOs and built on government structures designed to facilitate mass volunteering at community level: the Women's Development Army. The paper argues that externally driven localisation is often organised around project models that are shaped by two contradictory paradigms: one centring *resilience* and one centring *surveillance*. As a result, local aid workers and civil servants are faced with incompatible legitimacy requirements in their work. This paper uses a paradox perspective as a theoretical lens to explore how these local actors navigate these conflicting needs. It finds that they use impression management, especially visuals and performances, to sidestep the contradictions. This imagery conceals the disconnects between project strategy, implementation and the reality on the ground. As a side effect, it renders the problems with the externally driven approach invisible and legitimises the hierarchical status quo.

**Keywords** Ethiopia, Legitimacy work, Localisation, Project management, Paradox theory, Participation, Volunteers, Women's Development Army

## Introduction: externally driven localisation

There are ongoing calls in both the humanitarian and development sectors to localise aid and make it more participatory and community-based (e.g. Barbelet 2018, Chambers 1983). Whilst there is broad support for this general sentiment, there is no consensus regarding the key questions that are associated with these calls: i.e., who is 'local' (Melis & Apthorpe 2020), what is a 'community' (Titz et al 2018) and who determines what counts as 'locally led' (Kuipers et al 2019). There is also no consensus as to whether 'localisation' entails the transfer of resources, the transfer of agency and/or whether it entails

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centring local ways of being (Baguios et al 2021). Whilst some call to 'shift the power' and centre local (thought) leadership in aid (e.g. van Wessel et al 2023), there is no consensus as to whether localisation should entail such a transformative approach or whether it should simply mean decentralisation (Van Brabant and Patel 2017). This paper discusses a common response by global aid actors (and some national governments) to these calls and debates, namely, to try and shift the power without relinquishing control, a contradiction this paper refers to as *externally driven localisation*.

This approach entails trying to organise bottom-up approaches to aid in a top-down manner. To this end, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) initiate collaborations with local government bodies, staff their country and 'field' offices with nationals and/or partner with local actors who work with—or are part of—the communities that are the intended targets of aid. As this paper will show, some federal/national governments do the same. The goal of these external–local collaborations is to organise local, community-based, participatory aid (LCPA). Although they are often framed as 'partnerships', these collaborations tend to be hierarchical in nature with strategic direction, funding and monitoring primarily coming 'from above' and implementation, reporting and compliance primarily coming 'from below'. The projects themselves are embedded in broader global hierarchies that resemble those of the colonial era.

The hierarchical setup that often underpins LCPA affects how project contributors at all levels manage perceptions of legitimacy for such projects. Legitimacy is 'a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate' (Suchman 1995, p. 574). It is not a possession of a project but 'represents a relationship with an audience' (Suchman 1995, p. 594). The need for legitimacy is a powerful and parsimonious explanation for organisational behaviour (Deegan 2019), especially in the aid sector where NGOs heavily depend on donors for resources (Keating & Thrandardottir 2017). It is for this reason that this paper analyses LCPA project design and implementation through the lens of legitimacy, as opposed to from a more rationalist perspective. Specifically, it focuses on *legitimacy work*, which is the purposeful activity to shape audiences' evaluation of something as legitimate (Lefsrud et al 2020). Given the hierarchies that underpin LCPA, the main audiences for legitimacy work tend to be leading aid agencies, policy makers and donors in the Global North. Legitimacy work can be substantive, reflecting genuine commitment and action, and/or symbolic, where the focus lies on managing optics (Hrasky 2012). In the management literature, the latter is generally referred to as impression management (Conway et al 2015). Legitimacy work for aid projects is not limited to writing and speech; visuals and imagery (such as photos, videos and live performances) also play an important role (Dhanani, & Kennedy 2023). The case study presented in this paper focuses on how local aid workers, civil servants and community-based volunteers use project imagery to symbolically influence audience perceptions (Hrasky 2012). Imagery is effective for this purpose because it embodies both reality and creation, combining information with impression management (Davison 2014, p. 22). It allows aid projects to present a particular version of reality. Their photos, videos and live performances are choreographed forms of 'evidence-displaying' that are linked to wider impression management strategies (Dhanani & Kennedy 2023). As such, imagery gives insights into how a project manages strategic issues, balances different expectations and responds to institutional pressures and complexity (Meyer et al 2013, p. 490). In the context of LCPA, the main challenges that are addressed through the strategic use of imagery are the internal contradictions that are typical of LCPA project models.

These contradictions spring from the fact that two conflicting paradigms dominate the aid sector. When INGOs and governments conduct legitimacy work for LCPA projects, e.g. during the project design phase and when using the project to inform global/national policy and practice, they draw on examples from practice, policy and research that are underpinned by two conflicting sets of ideas. As this paper will discuss, the first paradigm centres on empowerment, self-reliance, local ownership and sustainability. Following Hilhorst (2018), this paper refers to this as the *resilience paradigm* in aid. The paper also identifies a second, conflicting, paradigm, which it refers to as the *surveillance paradigm*. This paradigm centres on professionalism, accountability, compliance and quality control. INGOs and national governments generally turn to the resilience paradigm when trying to persuade leading aid agencies, policy makers and donors in the Global North of the legitimacy of their LCPA strategy. However, when trying to persuade them of the legitimacy of their implementation tools and processes, they turn instead to the surveillance paradigm.

Due to power inequalities, local actors[1] are pressured to also accommodate both paradigms in their legitimacy work when they co-design and implement the project. The challenge they face is that the two paradigms present different and conflicting legitimacy requirements. The first set of requirements centres on community emancipation and self-reliance. To meet these requirements, local actors need to (be seen to) empower the project's

[1] 'Local actors' include both local aid workers and local civil servants (see Fig. 1).

**Table 1** The two conflicting paradigms that shape the legitimacy requirements for externally driven 'local aid'

| Paradigm | What aid projects should focus on | How aid should be designed and managed |
|---|---|---|
| Resilience | Empowerment<br>Self-reliance<br>Sustainability | Community actors operate with a high level of autonomy |
| Surveillance | Professionalism<br>Accountability<br>Compliance | Through external monitoring and control |
| Resilience & Surveillance | All of the above | Community actors operate with a high level of autonomy through external monitoring and control |

target communities to become self-sufficient in aid. This means that target communities must (be seen to) have a high level of autonomy in managing project activities locally. However, the second set of legitimacy requirements does not allow local actors to grant target communities significant autonomy within in the project. These requirements centre on compliance with sectoral and governmental standards, regulations and expectations. Meeting these requirements requires specialist expertise in aid monitoring and compliance that INGOs and larger local NGOs possess, but that the aid project's target communities generally do not have. Table 1 outlines how the contradictory legitimacy requirements of the two paradigms shape LCPA projects.[2]

The paper explores legitimacy work through the lens of paradox theory from the field of organisation and management science (Poole & van de Ven 1989). This lens was chosen because it centres on organisational tensions and contradictions. It sheds light on how actors attend to competing demands simultaneously (Smith & Lewis 2011, p.381). The paper finds that local and community actors use imagery to sidestep the paradox in their legitimacy work, creating the impression that both sets of incompatible legitimacy criteria have been met. However, this has the side effect of hiding disconnects between project strategy, implementation and the reality on the ground. This, in turn, renders problems with the top-down approach to LCPA invisible, which helps maintain this unhelpful status quo. The findings presented in this paper build on the work of the anthropologist (Mosse 2003) who showed almost 20 years ago how the need to 'make' and 'market' participatory aid leads to the legitimation of project models that are internally contradictory.

This paper explores an externally driven LCPA project that ran in Ethiopia from 2016 until 2020, during a period of prolonged drought and intercommunal tensions in the region. To protect the identity of all project contributors, the project is referred to by the pseudonym EMPOWER. It had originally been planned as a pure development project but was adapted prior to launch in light of unfolding humanitarian needs. The project sought to address both the symptoms and causes of the crisis. As such, it was neither a pure emergency relief project, nor a pure development project. Instead, it was an example of 'alchemical' humanitarianism (Barnett 2011), spanning the humanitarian-development nexus. The project was developed and rolled out by a consortium that included two international NGOs, the federal government of Ethiopia and local government authorities.

Figure 1 provides an overview of who/what this paper means by external drivers, local actors and community actors. 'External drivers' are national or global project partners with headquarters that are geographically and culturally remote from the project target areas. Ethiopia is a large country with over 110 million inhabitants, who live in ethno-linguistically based administrative regions[3] that are semi-autonomous. Given this context, this paper approaches the federal government of Ethiopia as an *external driver* of the project. 'Local actors', in this paper, refer to people working below the national level, for example, at district or municipality level. They are physically based in the project target areas. They include local civil servants working for local government bodies and local aid workers based at the 'field' offices of local or international NGOs. 'Community actors', on the other hand, refer to unpaid project volunteers living in the municipalities targeted by the project. In the aid sector, such actors are generally referred to as 'project participants' or as 'aid beneficiaries'.[4] In an LCPA project, project participants play an active, participatory role and can fairly be described as community volunteers. This

[2] 'Community actors' refers to members of the aid project's target community (see Fig. 1).

[3] The federation also includes two chartered cities that are not based on ethnicity and/or linguistics.

[4] The aid lexicon (e.g. 'beneficiaries' and 'field') is highly problematic, as explained by Aloudat (2021).

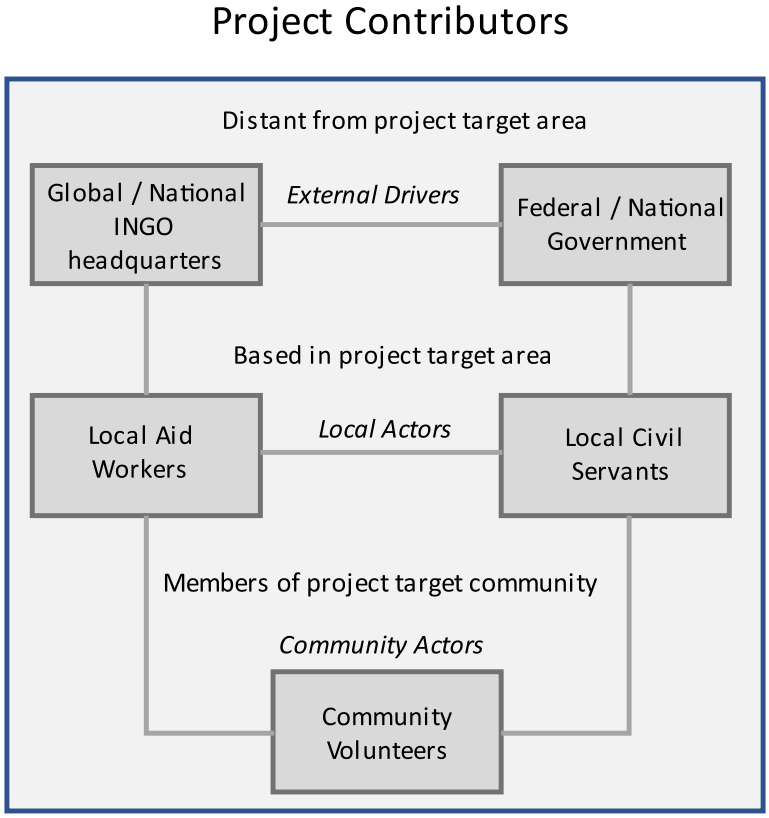


**Fig. 1** External drivers, local actors and community actors

paper uses the term 'project contributors' to refer to all external, local and community actors that contribute to an aid project.

This paper contributes to the literature on localisation and participation in humanitarian aid by showing why externally driven top-down approaches to LCPA continue to dominate even though they do not deliver the outcomes envisioned for LCPA. It also contributes to the literatures on legitimacy work and organisational paradoxes by highlighting the role project imagery plays in facilitating effective impression management in the context of contradictory legitimacy requirements.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. The next section discusses the two conflicting paradigms that LCPA project contributors draw on in their legitimacy work. It then discusses how these two paradigms lead to contradictory project models, with incompatible legitimacy requirements. Next, it provides the paper's theoretical framework, discussing paradox theory as a theoretical lens for analysing how local and community actors navigate incompatible demands in legitimacy work. It then goes on to describe the qualitative case study methodology on which this paper is based and introduces the EMPOWER project. This is followed by the paper's main findings and conclusion.

## Background: local empowerment through external control

This section discusses why LCPA project contributors draw on two contradictory paradigms in their legitimacy work.

### The resilience paradigm in disaster aid

The resilience paradigm consists of social change theories that focus on local self-reliance, empowerment and sustainability in aid. These theories provide the logic (or causal mechanism) that underpins LCPA, that is to say, the reasons why the approach should deliver the outcomes envisioned for it. Very broadly speaking, the theories about LCPA that fall within this paradigm hold that, unlike centrally organised top-down aid, LCPA has the potential to emancipate marginalised groups and empower local communities to become more self-reliant in the face of poverty, hazards, poor health and disasters. The argument behind this claim is that when local people take a leading role in community-based aid, they have

the opportunity to enhance their skillset, improve their (political) position, strengthen local relationships, establish connections with external actors and develop ties with relevant authorities. In other words, it allows them to build their human and social capital (Lin 2001), which in turn makes them more resilient. This means they are better equipped to prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from adversity (Aldrich and Meyer 2015, and Tierney 2014). For instance, by ensuring that their local priorities and perspectives are centred in aid and by taking ownership of disaster preparedness and response activities. The different theories for LCPA each put a different lens on this logic (or causal mechanism), depending on whether they constitute political critiques of the status quo or 'purely technical' solutions to delivering social change. Collectively, these theories form the basis for the legitimacy criteria of the resilience paradigm, both in terms of critical and 'purely technical' social change requirements (Thrandardottir, 2015). They lend legitimacy to LCPA strategies by providing arguments for why they can credibly facilitate empowerment and improve aid.

A central construct in (all) theories about LCPA that fall within this paradigm is that of 'the community.' Its imagery plays a core role in legitimacy work for LCPA, as this paper will discuss. It has connotations of a sense of shared identity and belonging as well common interests (Titz et al 2018). Whilst the term is sometimes claimed by a group of people who see themselves as distinct from others in a given context (e.g. Cohen 1985) and can be used to mobilise against oppression (Faas & Marino 2020), it can also be externally bestowed upon people for ideological, pragmatic or strategic reasons. In aid practice, the term is often used pragmatically as a stand-in for 'the locality where we work.' In legitimacy work, the term is used strategically to conjure up images of a group of people who harmoniously and communally work together towards their shared interests (Titz et al 2018). The term embodies a long history of research, advocacy and practices that aim to emancipate and empower disaster-affected groups in aid (e.g. Maskrey 1984). This vast body of work lends credibility (and, hence, legitimacy) to community-based approaches.

The resilience paradigm in aid emerged in late 1970s/early 1980s. By that time, a significant body of evidence had been developed showing that centrally designed and implemented aid often fails to address specific local needs and sometimes even deepens local vulnerabilities (Kafle & Murshed 2006). This happened around the same time that neoliberalism gained prominence, which led to an increased focus on the importance of local self-reliance, ownership and personal responsibility in disaster aid, as well as the need for aid interventions to be financially sustainable. By the 1990s, fostering 'resilience' had become a core focus of humanitarian aid (Hilhorst 2018). Until that point, disasters had generally been treated as exceptional occurrences whereby global or national responders needed to help local 'victims'. However, from the 1990s onwards, disasters increasingly came to be seen as inevitable and recurring outcomes of systemic problems, such as development failures. These systemic problems came to be understood through the lens of resilience. Local 'victims' were recast as local capable agents whose resilience, self-reliance and sense of ownership and personal responsibility for local development and disaster management should be fostered (Anholt 2022). Neoliberalism shifted the focus in aid from global and national actors to local people and local institutions as the first responders to crises and lead actors in development and disaster risk reduction. This contributed to growing calls on INGOs and national governments to support local aid that was decentralised, participatory and community-based (i.e., LCPA), leading to the phenomenon described in this paper: externally driven localisation. By 2018, when this case study was conducted, the resilience-focused practices and ideas related to LCPA had been fully institutionalized into standards, policies and guidelines (UNDRR 2015; UNISDR 2005). These documents formed the basis for the institutional legitimacy of the resilience paradigm (Thrandardottir 2015). Thus, it had become essential for legitimacy work to demonstrate compliance with these norms and regulations.

To be clear, resilience-centric LCPA does not just appeal to neoliberal organisations and governments. Over the past two decades, the Ethiopian state deployed a 'developmental state' strategy, which linked its legitimacy to its achievement of health and development goals through state-led action (Croke 2021). A core part of this strategy was the mass mobilisation of community-based volunteers. In the early 2000s, the state brought about a massive expansion of party and state structures at lower administrative levels that were designed to incorporate mass volunteering (Croke 2021). As with the global humanitarians, the Ethiopian government sought to persuade its domestic and international audiences of the legitimacy of LCPA on the basis of global research, policy and practice documents from the resilience paradigm. Ethiopian primary health care strategy documents cite, for example, the 1978 Alma Ata declaration, which advocates the 'full participation' of communities in health provision. As an early example of resilience thinking, Alma Ata states that primary health care 'requires and promotes maximum community and individual self-reliance and participation in the planning, organisation, operation and control of primary health care' (Maes et al 2015).

Thus, the government of Ethiopia based its legitimacy work for LCPA on the same arguments as the INGOs, namely that LCPA could 'empower' local people, enable them to assume ownership and personal responsibility for their own and their community's well-being, foster local self-reliance and resilience in the face of adversity[5] and result in locally-targeted, effective and financially sustainable interventions.

#### The surveillance paradigm in disaster and development aid

The second set of ideas that LCPA project contributors draw on in their legitimacy work revolve around professionalism, accountability, compliance and quality control. As outlined, this paper refers to this set of ideas as the *surveillance paradigm* in aid. Like the resilience paradigm, the surveillance paradigm is a product of neoliberalism. It emerged as a result of the commodification of aid. From the 1990s onward, operational actors in the sector increasingly had to 'market' and 'sell' their work to buyers. These buyers were not the local disaster-affected people themselves, but the donors who had the resources to pay for them (Collinson 2016). Over 90% of humanitarian aid is bought by national governments, who channel most of it through United Nations agencies and a few leading NGOs (Development Initiatives 2015). These organisations rely heavily on sub-contractors (operational actors) for the actual implementation of aid. The latter compete fiercely with each other for aid contracts. The result of this is that a small core of donors and lead agencies exert a lot of influence over implementing agencies, causing them to become similar to each other (Claeyé & Jackson 2012). These buyers of 'aid products' want goods and services that meet certain performance standards, such as those related to transparency and accountability. They are able to impose this on aid agencies as contractual requirements. The commodification of aid in the 1990s resulted therefore in a rapid professionalisation of the sector from which LCPA initiatives were not exempt. Legitimacy work for LCPA initiatives now involves the task of convincing donors and leading agencies about the projects' credibility in the market. The market requirements for legitimacy (Thrandardottir 2015) are closely linked to institutional legitimacy requirements since meeting market demands requires professional expertise in project management to showcase the sector's 'best practices' in accountability, compliance and quality control.

As discussed below, to convince donors and leading aid agencies of the credibility of LCPA initiatives in these areas, it is necessary to monitor the implementation efforts of community actors for quality control. This surveillance component of externally driven LCPA sometimes extends to monitoring the behaviour and attitudes of community actors at the household level. This is because LCPA project materials often stipulate a set of skills, attitudes and behaviours community actors need to acquire and demonstrate in order for the project to be successful (such as self-reliance, empowerment and resilience). This means that legitimacy work requires the monitoring and controlling of community actors' conduct. The case study presented in this paper explores how this played out in a project that was run in partnership with an authoritarian government.

## Legitimacy work around a paradox

#### A contradictory project model

The previous section described the two paradigms LCPA project contributors draw on to convince their audiences (primarily donors and leading aid agencies) of the legitimacy of their initiatives. It has sought to explain *why* these actors employ these two conflicting sets of ideas. This section will now outline *how* these competing paradigms inform LCPA project models and the implications this has for the legitimacy work done by local and community actors. A project model is a framework that describes how a project will be carried out. It specifies the project's intended outcomes and goals, the steps needed to achieve them and how progress is to be assessed and monitored. As such, it encompasses the criteria and metrics for evaluating project success and legitimacy. Indeed, what counts as success and lends legitimacy to an aid project is not an 'objective fact' or just any set of constructive outcomes. Instead, it is determined by the project model (Mosse 2003). Project models are designed to embody the ideas (or logics) that legitimise them. Their purpose is to render these logics manageable, by translating them into strategic and operational tools. These tools guide how local actors can/should conduct legitimacy work for LCPA as the project unfolds.

As outlined, LCPA project models typically embody ideas from two conflicting paradigms with competing legitimacy requirements. However, the two paradigms each underpin a different part of the project model (see Fig. 2). The ideas that fall within the resilience paradigm tend to be articulated in high-level project strategy. Many aid projects (such as the one described in this paper) use a theory of change approach to strategy development. A theory of change explains at a high strategic level, the rationale as to how and why an aid project will achieve its intended goals. In the context of LCPA, this tool will typically outline why the project's specific end-goals logically/causally depend on local participation

[5] It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore whether these goals are desirable.

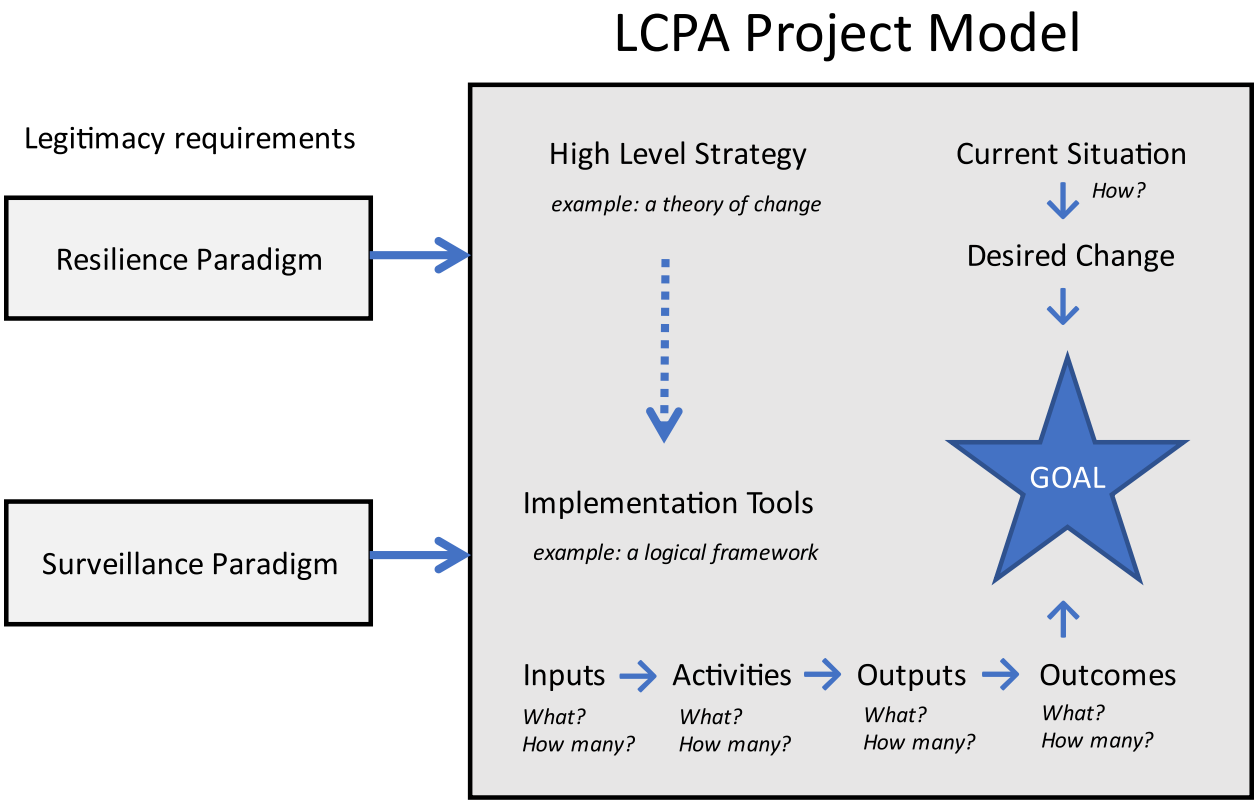


**Fig. 2** The LCPA project model: strategy and implementation tools are not well integrated because they are informed by conflicting legitimacy requirements

and community-based action. The purpose of a theory of change (or other high-level strategy document) in project design is to inform the development of project tools for implementation, such as a logical framework, project implementation plan, and monitoring, evaluation and learning framework. However, in the context of externally driven LCPA, these implementation tools are also (and primarily) shaped by the ideas that fall within the paradigm of surveillance. Unlike the resilience-centric logic, the surveillance-centric logic is generally not articulated in high-level project strategy.[6] Instead, it informs the design of project implementation tools and processes as an unspoken default.

Whereas a theory of change is a high-level strategy document, a logical framework depicts the theorised causal connections between project inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and goals at the level of detail needed for management. This is planned against a set timeframe in the project implementation plan, where quantified outputs (e.g. 465 training sessions) and outcomes (e.g. a 30% improvement in nutritional practices against baseline) have to be delivered to certain standards and at specific times (e.g. by the end of Year 3). The project implementation plan generally also includes a performance measurement framework as well as annual work plans and risk assessments. Specific project activities are included to evaluate the project's performance, such as monitoring and evaluation visits by humanitarian or government partners.

One of the main challenges local and community actors face in the context of externally driven LCPA is that they have to conduct legitimacy work on the basis of a project model that encompasses internally contradictory criteria for legitimacy. On one hand, the legitimacy of the project's strategy depends on whether the project can successfully bring about social change by empowering community actors and centring their agency in aid. According to the criteria of the resilience paradigm, to be credible in the market, an LCPA project needs to deliver services such as 'participation' and 'fostering local self-reliance' and goods such as 'resilient communities' and 'empowered women' (see also Mosse 2003). On the other hand, the legitimacy of the project's implementation depends on the project's adherence to sectoral norms and expectations (e.g., 'best practices'). To be credible in the market according to the criteria of the surveillance

[6] with the exception of ideas surrounding accountability.

paradigm, the project needs to deliver these commodities as professional competitive products that score well against accountability, compliance and quality control metrics. Whereas the first set of criteria logically requires community actors to be able to operate with a high level of autonomy, the second set of criteria requires local actors to facilitate extensive external monitoring and control. This means that genuine commitment and action (i.e. substantive legitimacy work) to deliver against both is marked by a paradox: local actors have to empower community actors through external control (see Table 1).

#### Paradox theory

This paper explores this legitimacy challenge through the lens of *paradox theory* from organisation and management science. A paradox is 'a persistent contradiction between interdependent elements' (Schad et al 2016), and a paradox perspective is a meta-theoretical lens on organisational tensions and contradictions (van Hille 2020). It explores 'how organizations can attend to competing demands simultaneously' (Smith & Lewis 2011, p.381). The challenge a paradox poses lies in the fact that the incompatible requirements are *all* essential to legitimacy. In externally driven LCPA, local actors need to simultaneously grant autonomy to community actors and maintain control. This paradoxical situation is not something that can be 'solved' at the level of the project, as the contradictions are integral to the wider system in which it is embedded, i.e. the deeply intertwined paradigms of resilience and surveillance. This paper explores how local and community actors navigate this paradox using impression management. It focuses on the role of imagery (visuals and performances) and the impact this has on the envisioned outcomes of localisation and participation.

## Methods: case study research

This section outlines the methods used in the paper. It describes the logics of enquiry, the research setting and how data was created and analysed.

#### The logics of enquiry: case study research

As outlined, this paper is based on case study research. This entails analysing a real-life phenomenon in-depth and within its real-world context on the basis of one or more cases (e.g. Ridder 2017). A case is a loosely bounded system, such as an organisation or a project. Case study research is useful when a phenomenon cannot be extracted from its context or when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are blurred (Yin 1981). This is true for externally driven LCPA, whereby each manifestation is shaped by a context-specific set of relationships and hierarchies. This paper looks at a single case study, providing a within-case analysis (Eisenhardt 1989). The paper looks at how project stakeholders sought to conduct legitimacy work for an LCPA project—i.e. at the social construction of reality and meaning. As such, the case study approach used in this paper is based on social constructivism (e.g. Stake 1995). The research methodology used to develop the case study is organisational ethnography, which is ethnographic research that focuses on organisations and their processes of organising (Ybema et al 2009).

#### The case study

As outlined, the case study selected for this research was an externally driven LCPA project in Ethiopia, which this paper refers to by the pseudonym EMPOWER. EMPOWER was in part selected for theoretical reasons (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007), specifically, for its project model and the hierarchical manner in which it was run. Whereas EMPOWER's strategy was almost exclusively based on ideas from the resilience paradigm, its implementation drew heavily on ideas from the surveillance paradigm. As such, its project model constituted a representative example of the phenomenon this paper aims to analyse. To be clear, it is very easy to find a representative example of this project model because it is the default in external–local LCPA partnerships. In addition to being selected for theoretical reasons, EMPOWER was also chosen due to its intrinsic interest (Stake 1995). This interest lies in the fact that it was embedded in two vertical systems—government and NGO—and subject to both neoliberal and statist rationales for LCPA (which turned out to be highly compatible).

#### The research methods

Fieldwork for this paper was conducted in Ethiopia from September to December 2018. It primarily consisted of participant observation at a district level NGO office of the EMPOWER project. The all-Ethiopian staff not only made a desk available for the author in their office but also invited her to all project events and office celebrations. They also let her accompany them on their visits to project implementation sites. Many district staff were fluent in English and interpreted/explained events to the author. In return for being hosted, the author was able to assist the district office with NGO communications and report writing thanks to her decade-plus of experience in the INGO sector. The author took copious photos, video recordings and field notes during field visits and project events, focusing on how local and community actors conducted legitimacy work for the project. She also helped the communications team write 'success stories' about community actors who had turned their lives around thanks to EMPOWER. She followed hereby the lead of

the local project staff, copying their story templates and narrative framing. As such, she was an active participant in the process she analyses in this paper.

As is the case with all ethnographic work, the author's identity greatly shaped the research process as well as the analysis presented in this paper. This paper is written from the perspective of a female, white, practitioner-academic from the Global North. The author's identity heavily influenced her interactions with community actors, who would sometimes mistake her for a donor representative or senior member of the lead INGO's northern headquarters. As described in the case study vignettes, she was often ascribed the role of 'external audience' for the project's legitimacy work, which, given the focus of this paper, was helpful.

The insights presented in the case study are based on field notes as well as an analysis of EMPOWER project documents, including the project implementation plan, theory of change, logical framework, and monitoring and evaluation tools. It is further based on a media analysis, focussing on project-related plans, reports, photos, posters and videos, some of which the author helped create. The case study is also informed by 30 in-depth qualitative interviews the author undertook, partially remotely (prior to fieldwork) and partially whilst on the ground. The interviews were later transcribed. All information thus gathered was qualitatively coded and analysed thematically. This was done to identify patterns (themes) within and across sources—and to identify the connections between these themes (Attride-Stirling 2001). The background and context of the case study are based on a review of academic and practitioner literature.

To prevent any unintended adverse consequences to anyone working on EMPOWER, the project itself and all project contributors have been anonymized. The only actor that has not be anonymised is the Federal Government of Ethiopia. Anonymizing the federal government would have required anonymising the country, which would have removed too much of the context necessary to adequately describe this single qualitative case study.

## Findings: legitimacy work around a paradox

This part of the paper presents the case study's findings. After providing the background and context to the EMPOWER project, it describes how local and community actors supported the efforts of the project's external drivers to persuade global and domestic audiences of the legitimacy of EMPOWER. It describes how the project contributors drew on the ideas and criteria of the resilience paradigm to convince these audiences of EMPOWER's strategy, tailoring their input to fit its logic during co-design and providing written and visual evidence of its success during implementation. It then goes on to describe how the project contributors drew on the practices and metrics of the surveillance paradigm to convince these audiences of the professionalism of EMPOWER's implementation, providing written and visual evidence of accountability, compliance and quality control. The case study shows how the project and wider hierarchies that shaped EMPOWER led local and community actors to support the legitimacy efforts of the project's external drivers, resorting to impression management to paper over the internal contradictions of the resulting project model.

### Background and context of the EMPOWER project

#### *An external–local partnership around a 'permanent crisis'*

At the start of the EMPOWER project, 25% of Ethiopia's districts were officially facing a food crisis. As a result, children and pregnant or lactating women were in urgent need of supplementary feeding and treatment for severe acute malnutrition (FAO 2016; UNICEF 2016). The project was rolled out in three districts that were amongst the worst affected. These areas all experienced prolonged drought and intercommunal tensions that occasionally escalated into violence. Against this backdrop, EMPOWER set out to improve the nutritional status of women of reproductive age and children under 5. Its strategy for achieving this goal was LCPA.

EMPOWER's approach to delivering LCPA was typical of consortia led by INGOs and/or national governments. The project was initiated by two INGOs in partnership with the Federal Government of Ethiopia. The lead INGO acted as an intermediary with the project's global donors and monitored its progress. EMPOWER partnered with local government nutrition coordination committees for project co-design. After launch, the project was supervised by the lead INGO's Ethiopian country office and managed by its district offices. The latter recruited community mobilisers to coordinate project activities at the ward (kebele) level together with local government health extension workers. All staff working on EMPOWER in Ethiopia, except for the director of the country office, were Ethiopian. Whilst this setup was described as a 'partnership', relationships were strictly vertical. On the INGO's side, community mobilizers reported to INGO district staff, who in turn reported to country headquarters, who reported to Northern headquarters, who reported to the donor and global LCPA stakeholders. Relationships between the different levels of government involved in the project were equally hierarchical. This setup has been depicted in Fig. 3.

The EMPOWER project focused on gender, livelihoods and the community-based management of acute

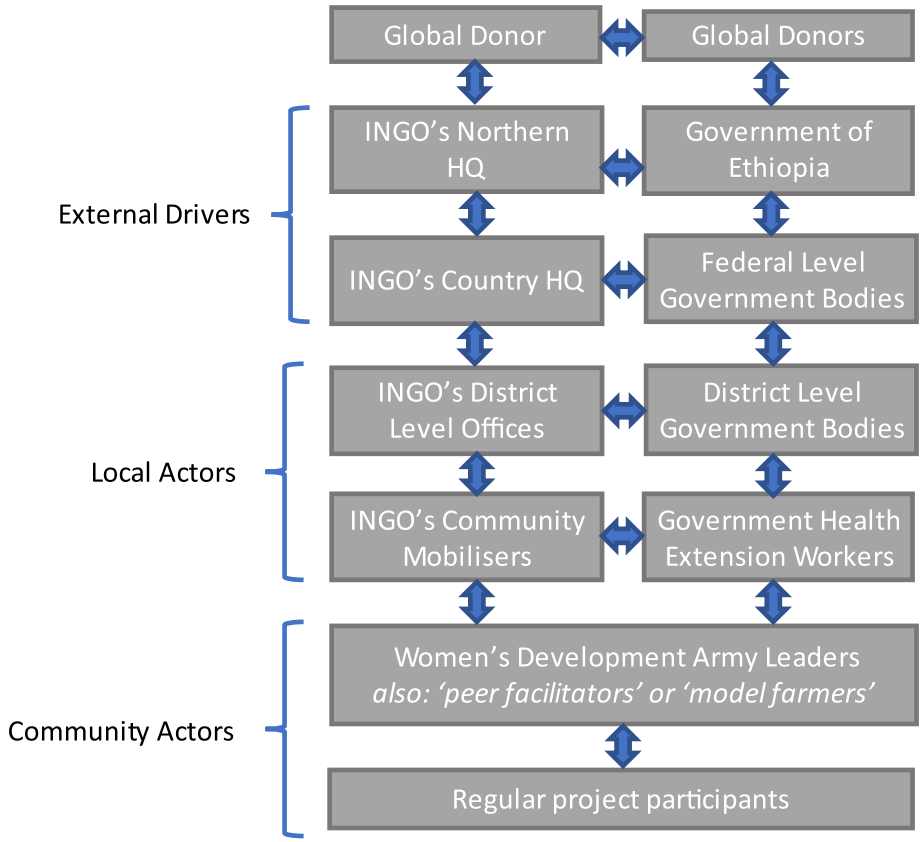


**Fig. 3** The hierarchical structure of the EMPOWER project

malnutrition. At village level, related project activities were primarily implemented by female volunteers through the structures of the Women's Development Army. These 'Army leaders' facilitated and/or modelled the community-based activities for other, 'regular', project participants (see Fig. 3).

#### *The Women's Development Army*

Over the past 15 years, Ethiopia has radically expanded its primary health care services. A core component of this was its Health Extension Programme (Croke 2021), which trained and employed health extension workers to deliver basic primary care (Assefa et al 2019). However, only 35,000 paid health extension worker jobs were created to serve a population of 90 million (Maes et al 2015). To strengthen primary health care systems, in 2011, the government rolled out a new initiative called the Women's Development Army (Closser et al 2019). The Army consisted of networks of rural women who were to act as volunteers for health and development work at community level. This enabled the government to task-shift some community-based activities from paid health extension workers to unpaid female volunteers.

By 2016, the initiative involved some 3 million women, including Army leaders and regular members. Army leaders were responsible for a number of tasks, such as monitoring illnesses and pregnancies, supporting immunisation campaigns, and passing on messages between households and health extension workers. The core focus of their work was prevention. Specifically, they were to act as 'model women' and demonstrate good health behaviour to their communities (Teklehaimanot & Teklehaimanot 2013). The government envisioned that the Army would ultimately incorporate all adult women living in the countryside (Maes et al 2015). Ideally, Army leaders were chosen for their status as a 'model women', meaning that they had adopted a lifestyle that the federal government deemed 'healthy' and 'development-minded' (Maes et al 2015). Furthermore, they were to model a sense of 'responsibility' and 'ownership' for their own health and development. 'Regular' Army members were to follow and learn from the Army leaders by participating in their health and development activities.

The EMPOWER project was designed to build on the health extension programme, deploying the Army leaders (see Fig. 4). The project tasked these female volunteers

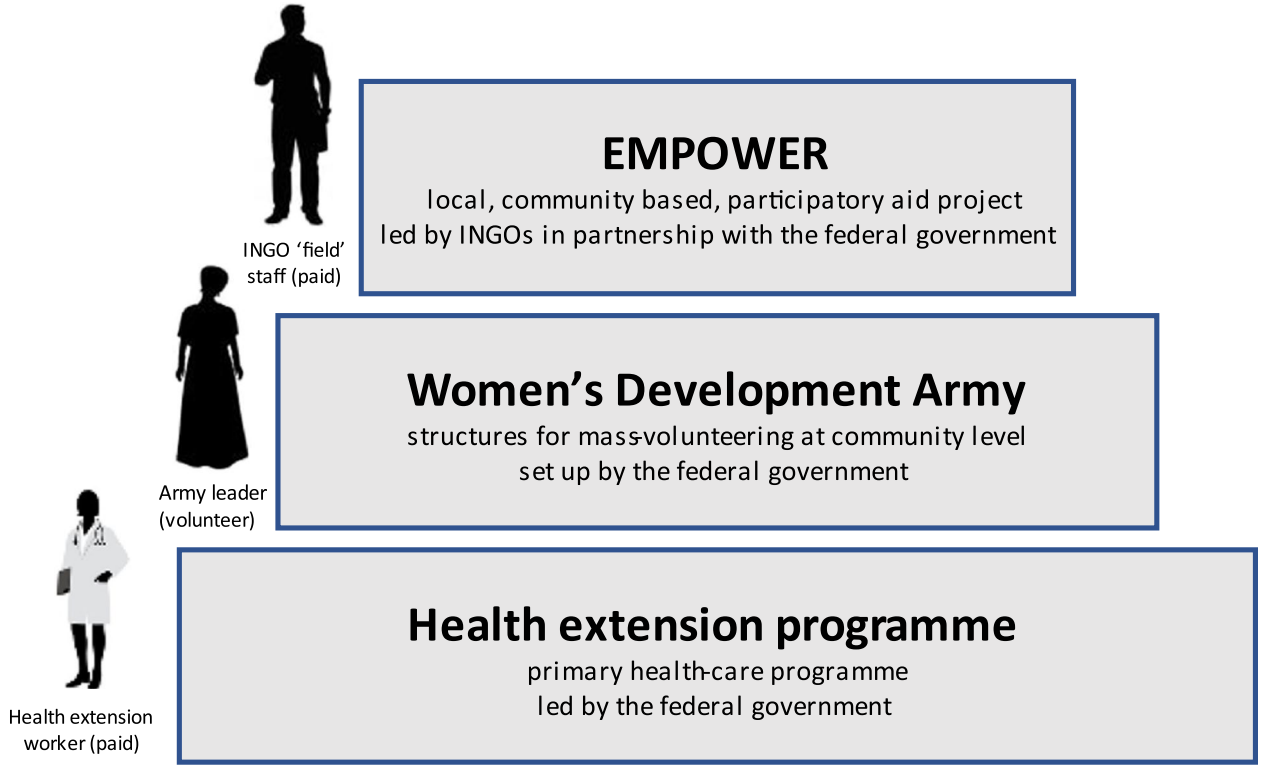


**Fig. 4** The Women's Development Army was created to expand Ethiopia's Health Extension Programme. EMPOWER was designed to build on both

with educating their peers on nutrition, gender, and livelihoods. In line with the Army's focus on 'model women', the volunteers and their families were expected to model good nutritional and health practices, as well as progressive attitudes towards gender, so as to encourage and inspire their peers to do the same. Volunteers would gather women over for coffee or at church or in the mosque to promote healthy beliefs, desires and behaviours. They would teach how to prepare nutritious meals and promote drought resistant farming.

The government's idea behind the Army metaphor was to mobilise volunteers who worked with military discipline (Maes et al 2015). Army leaders were expected to be disciplined and (willingly) monitor and discipline other women, keeping track of trouble makers and ensuring that all women displayed desirable beliefs and behaviours. Allegedly, political loyalties were also tested at Army meetings, resulting in the reporting of those with anti-government views (Fick 2019). The fact that the Ethiopian government used state structures for the dual purpose of facilitating mass volunteering and surveillance is not unusual. Nation-states have a tendency to grow towards surveillance societies (Boersma et al 2014). Furthermore, the institutionalisation of participation is sometimes used to entrench authoritarian practices (Dhungana & Curato 2021). Due to this element of surveillance, Army leaders increasingly came to be seen as political agents (Croke 2021). Thus, even though the term 'Women's Development Army' is featured centrally in EMPOWER's project documents, by 2018, the staff no longer seemed comfortable using that label for their female volunteers, referring to them instead as 'peer facilitators', 'mothers' or 'model farmers'.

### EMPOWER's project model

This section looks at how local and community actors conducted legitimacy work for EMPOWER's project model. Its development was led by aid workers from the lead INGO's Northern and Ethiopian headquarters. To facilitate co-design, they held consultations and workshops with EMPOWER's local partners (the government nutrition coordination committees) in the project target areas. During these consultations and workshops, the external and local actors jointly designed the project's strategy and implementation tools.

#### *EMPOWER's strategy*

As outlined, EMPOWER's end goal was to improve nutritional outcomes for women of reproductive age and children under 5. To achieve this goal, EMPOWER first developed a high-level strategy. As is common in the

aid sector, EMPOWER's strategy was designed using a theory of change approach. EMPOWER's analysis of the core drivers of malnutrition amongst mothers and children focused on gender inequality at the household and community levels. It highlighted how these inequalities constrained women's agency in the areas of health, nutrition and household economics. Its envisioned solution was women's empowerment through participation and leadership in local community-based health, nutrition and livelihood initiatives (i.e. LCPA). EMPOWER sought to persuade its global and domestic audiences of the legitimacy of its analysis of the problem and solution on the basis of a literature review of highly reputable sources on nutrition[7] as well as the input and feedback from local consortium partners. The ideas that were meant to legitimise EMPOWER's strategy came from the resilience paradigm: they centred on empowerment, local ownership, self-reliance and (financial) sustainability.

EMPOWER's strategy was also designed to align with the existing priorities and initiatives of global and national consortium partners, such as the Women's Development Army.

> The project is designed to build on these [Women's Development Army] community structures through processes that examine and challenge beliefs and assist men and women to work together to find sustainable solutions to change health and nutrition outcomes. The design will create local ownership of solutions to address malnutrition.
>
> [EMPOWER Project Implementation Plan, 20.06.2016]

Volunteering in the Army was portrayed as giving women more decision-making power and autonomy within the family. Other promised benefits (highlighted by the government, (Maes et al 2015) included intrinsic satisfaction, civic mindedness, self-sufficiency and self-generated development. LCPA was portrayed as a mechanism that encouraged volunteers to 'own' their work and think of it as work they did 'for themselves'. The women were depicted as being driven by a sense of civic duty towards their community, eschewing payment or rent seeking. This envisioned sense of ownership and civic-mindedness amongst community-based volunteers was core to legitimacy work directed at donors: it was portrayed as more cost-effective and sustainable than interventions whereby international donors pay local labourers.

Thus, female volunteers played a central role in EMPOWER's strategy. Not only were they the main implementers of the project activities but they were also the main 'project deliverables'. The legitimacy of EMPOWER's strategy hinged on these women becoming 'empowered', 'self-reliant' and 'owners' of strategies to manage drought and malnutrition. Therefore, once the project had started, they were the primary focus *and key performers of* EMPOWER's legitimacy work. An important part of their role consisted of creating visuals and performances of 'ownership', 'empowerment' and 'self-reliance' to support the project's impression management efforts. This is illustrated in vignettes 1 and 2.

#### *Extract from field notes: enacting legitimacy during a 'donor visit'*

> The EMPOWER project manager had invited me and a West-African volunteer to join her on a project 'field visit' to the most remote target area in the district. After a three-hour drive, we left the car and continued on foot. We were joined at this point by the local community mobiliser for this remote municipality. After an hour's hike down a slippery path together, we eventually reached an open area. There, on a tarpaulin on the ground, sat a group of women in a circle. In their midst stood a yellow money box. They had been waiting for us, for hours at that point, I imagined, given how long it had taken us to get there. The community mobiliser addressed them in the local language. After a brief exchange, he spoke at length to the project manager in Amharic. She then turned to me and the volunteer. "That lady is a model farmer", she explained in English. She then pointed to the plants behind the women, "that is her farm". I can't tell an orchid from a cauliflower, but I pretended to be impressed. That seemed to please everyone. The project manager continued. "They are starting a rotating fund. Today is their first meeting". I nodded a bit, nonplussed. Surely, they hadn't waited for us to hold their first meeting? At this point, the model farmer produced a notebook and the women began a discussion in the local language. I had no idea what was being said but it all looked very professional. I was attending a business meeting. I later learned that the community mobiliser had mistakenly believed the volunteer and myself to be representatives of the project's main northern donor and had announced our visit to the women as such.
>
> [Field notes 05.11.2018]

This 'visual evidence' of empowered self-reliant women owning and managing a rotating fund to support their farming and other livelihood efforts during a prolonged drought appeared to lend credibility to EMPOWER's

[7] e.g. The Lancet series on 'Maternal and Child Nutrition' (2013) and 'Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN): A framework for action' (2011).

strategy. However, as the paper will argue below, the strategy that this imagery appeared to validate was not actually used during implementation. Due to the paradoxical nature of externally driven localisation, EMPOWER's strategy was disconnected from both the reality of the project and its implementation.

#### *How legitimacy work around a paradox led to a disconnect between strategy and reality*

When co-designing the EMPOWER project, local actors clearly understood that their external counterparts aimed to anchor the legitimacy of EMPOWER's strategy to the idea that greater localisation, participation, and community engagement in aid would foster local self-reliance and community resilience. The lead INGO was a signatory to several international standards and codes of conduct that embodied the ideas and criteria of the resilience paradigm.[8] Furthermore, the Federal Government turned to this paradigm in its efforts to persuade its audiences of the legitimacy of the Women's Development Army, on which EMPOWER was intended to build. However, in spite (*or rather because*) of their aims to foster resilience through LCPA, in practice, strategy design was primarily driven from above. This counter-intuitive outcome is the result of the paradoxical legitimacy pressures that characterise externally driven localisation.

Given that EMPOWER's strategy was to present resilience-centric LCPA as the causal mechanism (or logic) through which the project would achieve its end goal, it was imperative for the project's legitimacy that the strategy be developed in a participatory manner with local and community actors. However, as is the case with most aid projects, EMPOWER had to complete its strategy design prior to being launched to obtain the required legal permissions and funding. This meant that the female volunteers, community mobilisers and the health extension workers who would play a core role in project implementation could not contribute, as they had not been recruited yet. Instead, EMPOWER's local consortium partners (the local government nutrition coordination committees) were consulted as members of the local community to provide input on EMPOWER's strategy design.

Given the hierarchical nature of the project, these local actors were under significant pressure to tailor their analysis of the problem (i.e. malnutrition in mothers and children) to the solution the global and national partners desired (i.e. resilience centric LCPA). Indeed, the fact that the project's external drivers were to a greater or lesser extent reputationally invested in resilience-centric LCPA created a legitimacy imperative for *all* project contributors to conduct legitimacy work for this approach throughout EMPOWER's design and implementation. This pressure was strengthened by the dominance of the resilience paradigm in aid and its attractiveness to global donors.

The input provided by local actors (as summarised in the project materials) centred on community-level problems that were suitable to be addressed through resilience-centric LCPA. Specifically, it focused on local community-based gender inequalities as major barriers to improving nutritional outcomes for mothers and children. It listed, for example, harmful traditional practices and existing community norms that resulted in food allocation discrimination within households. It further mentioned women's limited access to health information and men's lack of awareness and engagement with maternal, infant and young child nutrition. The local actors' focus on community level gender inequalities also aligned with the INGOs' and the federal government's shared aim of mainstreaming gender in nutrition strategies. Thus, the input provided by the local actors perfectly fitted the problem and solution that the project's external drivers had already identified: community-based gender inequalities as the root cause of malnutrition amongst mothers and children to be solved through resilience-centric LCPA. This fact does not imply dishonest intent on the part of any of the actors involved. Nor does it imply that the analysis of the problem and solution was 'wrong'.

It was, however, incomplete. Key local factors that directly affected EMPOWER's intended outcome were not included. What was missing from EMPOWER's strategy were factors that fell outside the project's predetermined remit, were politically sensitive or that could upset relationships within the consortium. Crucially, local issues that conflicted with some of the key imagery used to persuade audiences of the legitimacy of resilience centric LCPA were also not included. As outlined in the introduction, the imagery of community with its connotations of a sense of shared identity and common interests plays an important role in impression management for resilience centric LCPA. It played a central role in the government's legitimacy work for the Women's Development Army. The Army was portrayed as building on, and reinforcing, existing traditional mutual help arrangements within communities (Woldie & Balabanova 2018). The idea that was put forward was that the female volunteers, as members of their communities, would be able to tap into existing community cohesion to fulfil their responsibilities through persuasion, leverage, enforcement and the modelling of desirable behaviour (Woldie & Balabanova 2018). Given that EMPOWER was designed

[8] For example, the Core Humanitarian Standard https://corehumanitarianstandard.org

to build on the Army, the imagery of community also played a core role in its legitimacy work. Like many aid programmes, EMPOWER's strategy was based on the idea that training and resources provided to its 'primary beneficiaries' (i.e. the female volunteers and their families) would benefit everyone else within the project area as 'indirect beneficiaries'. The imagery of community used in the project documents suggested (without spelling this out) that this would happen because everyone in the target areas worked together as one communal cooperative entity with no internal tensions (worth mentioning in the strategy materials) other than those surrounding gender.

Observations and discussions with local people in EMPOWER's project areas showed however that EMPOWER's target community was anything but one communal cooperative entity. During this period of severe and prolonged drought, there were intra-communal tensions over access to water. People from some hamlets had control over the scarce water resources, whereas people from other hamlets had to walk an hour (or more) to access free water—or barter for it with neighbouring hamlets. The areas had also seen intercommunal violence within their very recent histories. However, the language and imagery used in EMPOWER's strategy shows nothing of this local reality. Instead, it gives the impression that only community level gender inequalities stood in the way of good nutritional outcomes for mothers and children. EMPOWER district level project staff spent significant time navigating intra-communal tensions surrounding access to water with local authorities. However, they could not use their achievements in this area for legitimacy work because recognising the need for these efforts in the first place undermined EMPOWER's solution of resilience-centric LCPA. The pressure to match EMPOWER's strategy analysis to the predetermined solution of resilience-centric LCPA thus led to a disconnect between project strategy and the reality on the ground.

#### *EMPOWER's implementation: surveillance*

In addition, legitimacy pressures surrounding project implementation led to a disconnect between project strategy and project practices. As described above, due to the professionalisation of the aid sector, convincing donors and lead aid agencies of a project's credibility had come to depend on demonstrating compliance to donor and government requirements and adherence to sectoral standards and expectations. What this meant for EMPOWER was that its strategy of fostering empowerment, local ownership and self-reliance had to be translated into a series of concrete outputs and outcomes that could be put on a timeline and be monitored and measured for the purpose of external quality control. To enable monitoring and measurement, EMPOWER's theory of change was translated into a logical framework. This tool linked the project's overarching goal (i.e. improving the nutritional status of mothers and children) to measurable outcomes (e.g. improved attitudes towards gender issues that influence nutrition) to quantified outputs (e.g. x number of community dialogues conducted). The project implementation plan specified the standards, times and manner in which these quantified outputs had to be delivered. It included a performance measurement framework as well as annual work plans and risk assessments to facilitate project evaluation. In effect, it outlined by what date and to what standard EMPOWER had to deliver 'empowered self-reliant women'.

EMPOWER's monitoring and evaluation setup was hierarchical, as is typical of externally driven LCPA. Furthermore, it was based on state-led LCPA structures (the Women's Development Army) that the government also used for monitoring attitudes and beliefs at village level. This setup greatly influenced legitimacy work by local and community actors. The vignette below illustrates how female volunteers and their families endeavoured to create the required imagery for the project outcome 'improved attitudes towards gender issues that influence nutrition'. Their efforts were directed at the INGOs for quality control and at the state for surveillance. Community mobilisers and government health extension workers played a central role in managing impressions during project monitoring events, together with the female volunteers.

#### *Extract from field notes: enacting legitimacy during a 'monitoring visit'*

> I was told by staff at the district office where I was based that their office had been selected by headquarters for a celebratory knowledge sharing event. Staff from all three district offices and their local government counterparts had been invited, as well as staff from the NGO's headquarters in Addis Ababa. Staff from 'rival' district offices were quick to reframe the event as a 'monitoring visit'. On the first day of the event, attendees were shown video recordings of project successes. One week before the event, NGO staff asked me to accompany them to three specific sites where the success stories were to be shot. At each site, we were accompanied by the NGO's local community mobilizer and the government's local health worker. They identified the women whose success stories were to be filmed. The videos consisted of interviews with project

participants and staged performances of project activities, such as a group of women performing a peer discussion about nutrition and model farmers pretending to work on their farms. The video was subtitled in English, even though the entire audience was Ethiopian.

On the second day of the event, the attendees visited the same three sites where the success stories had been shot. At each of the three sites, NGO staff and government officials were welcomed by project participants. The women were dressed up in their most beautiful festive outfits and sang elaborate songs when the guests arrived. Apparently, they sang songs of gratitude for the EMPOWER project. They sang that, unlike other aid projects, this project had fulfilled its promises and had not let them down. In each of the three sites, I noticed the local community mobilizer and government local health worker behind the women. The EMPOWER staff and government officials took selfies with the singing project participants in the background. A professional photographer was also present to capture the spectacle. When the singing finally ended, attendees were taken to areas where project participants basically did what they had done when the video footage had been shot: they staged project activities. Model farmers busied themselves on their model farms or displayed the nutritious foods they had grown on sheets on the ground.

They also performed peer group discussions for the audience about gender and nutrition. They made a real effort to make their conversation look genuine, even though they were far outnumbered by NGO staff and government officials who stood around them, watching. The peer facilitator wrote down names on an attendance sheet and then led a question and answer session about nutrition. Apparently, the attendees gave perfect answers, demonstrating their understanding of key nutritional issues as described in the EMPOWER syllabus, and they asked intelligent, considered questions. A lady from headquarters noted that only a few women spoke during the peer group performance. She questioned whether all women in the group had equal knowledge on the topic of nutrition and berated everyone present to do more to encourage participation. A senior staff member from one of the other district offices asked a group of men who were performing a peer group discussion how many of them cooked at home. Two tentatively raised their hands, followed by the others. 'Rival' NGO staff noted that the other men had done so because they sensed that this was the right answer to give. The staffer pressed the issue and asked one of the men whether he knew how to prepare shiro (an extremely common dish). I don't know what he answered but whatever he said was met with a lot of laughter.

[Field notes 29.11.2018]

The vignette illustrates how the volunteers and their families, guided by community mobiliser and health extension worker, spent hours managing impressions for the EMPOWER project. They created visual evidence of female empowerment, self-reliance and ownership that appeared to validate EMPOWER's strategy of fostering community resilience through LCPA. However, this strategy did not actually play a central role in the project's implementation.

#### *How legitimacy work around a paradox led to disconnects between strategy and implementation*

The female volunteers leading on EMPOWER's day-to-day implementation at village level lacked the experience in aid project management required to ensure that the project met all accountability, compliance and quality control requirements. Given that demonstrating compliance with those requirements was essential to persuading donor and wider sectoral audiences of the project's legitimacy, local actors delegated only limited responsibility to them and subjected them to substantial external monitoring and control. Clearly, this approach was diametrically opposed to EMPOWER's strategy. EMPOWER's theory of change presented resilience-centric LCPA as the logic or causal mechanism through which the project would achieve its intended goal. According to this strategy, malnutrition in mothers and children was to be redressed through female empowerment, self-reliance and ownership of sustainable solutions, which would be brought about through their leadership and participation in community-based aid. As such, EMPOWER's strategy required the consortium to grant significant autonomy to its community actors. However, legitimacy pressures surrounding implementation did not allow for this. Local actors were faced with a paradox. They had to empower community actors to be self-reliant and 'own' the solutions to malnutrition. However, they had to do so through hierarchical project structures that demanded (and provided) strict external control and monitoring (see Fig. 5). Whereas the former was essential to persuading audiences of the legitimacy of EMPOWER's strategy, the latter was essential to convincing them of the credibility of EMPOWER's implementation.

Given the hierarchical setup, local actors did the only thing they could do: square the circle by creating the imagery required for symbolic—but not

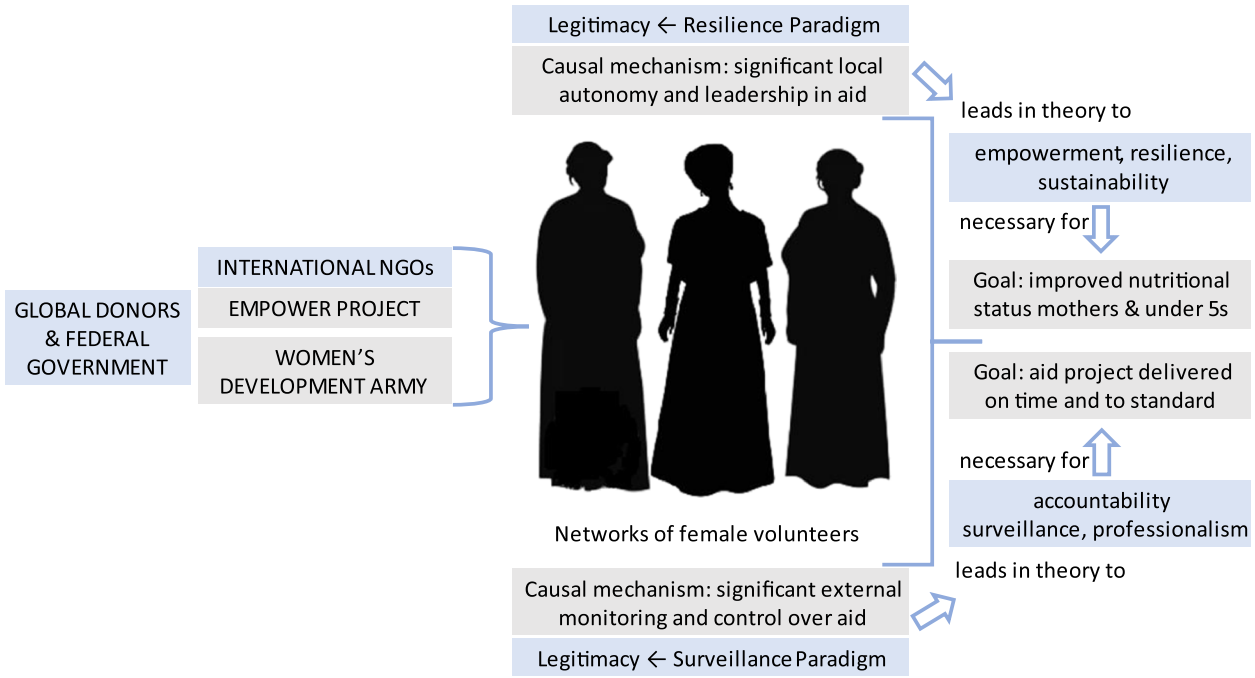


**Fig. 5** EMPOWER's contradictory project model

substantive—legitimacy work against both contradictory paradigms. This impression management obscured the disconnects between strategy, reality and implementation and appeared to validate the top-down bottom-up project model in its entirety. The female volunteers actively contributed to this impression management because they benefitted from the project, although not necessarily in the way that the project had intended. Volunteering for EMPOWER bolstered the women's social network position, enabling them to act as brokers between 'their communities', the NGO and local civil servants. Whilst the women were supposed to avoid rent seeking and volunteer out of pure civic-mindedness, many tried to use the opportunity to create patronage ties. Indeed, as shown in vignette 2, project staff and local civil servants were treated as patrons and benefactors. However, contrary to the imagery of empowerment, self-reliance and ownership, the female volunteers had very little autonomy within EMPOWER. They had no influence over project design or management—and even in the field of implementation, they had to take the lead from local community mobilisers and health extension workers. They were 'empowered' to follow instructions. They had to become self-reliant through external control. This heavy reliance on external drivers limited the volunteers' sense of ownership over project activities and, therefore, the project's sustainability.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored why top-down approaches in aid persist in spite of ongoing calls for reform to bring about greater localisation and community participation in aid. It has shown that even aid projects that specifically aim for local, community-based, participatory aid (LCPA) are often implemented in a hierarchical manner that undermines the intended outcomes of such projects, such as community empowerment, self-reliance and local ownership in aid. It looked specifically at LCPA collaborations between external and local actors, an approach it termed 'externally driven LCPA'.

The paper's focus has been on the role *legitimacy work* plays in maintaining unhelpful hierarchies in aid. Legitimacy work, in the context of LCPA projects, refers to efforts to persuade target audiences of the desirability, propriety and appropriateness of the project's strategy and its implementation. It can be substantive, reflecting genuine commitment and action, and/or symbolic, where the focus lies on managing optics. Due to global aid hierarchies, legitimacy work is mostly directed upwards towards donors, government agencies and leading aid organisations. In order to persuade these actors of the legitimacy of an LCPA project, project contributors[9] must establish a fit between their project

[9] 'Project contributors' includes all external, local and community actors who contribute (see Fig. 1).

(as an object of legitimacy) and the legitimacy criteria for aid that currently dominate the sector at the global level. However, they face a challenge because the neoliberal era has given rise to two conflicting sets of ideas (or paradigms) about aid: the resilience paradigm and the surveillance paradigm. These two paradigms have legitimacy criteria for aid that are incompatible with each other.

The resilience paradigm in aid is the driving force behind the ongoing calls in the humanitarian and development sectors to localise aid, make it more participatory and involve communities. It centres on responsibilising local communities for managing disasters, health and development and, therefore, logically requires them to operate with a high level of autonomy in aid to enable their empowerment, self-reliance and sense of ownership. The surveillance paradigm, on the other hand, centres on professionalism, accountability and compliance in aid. It underpins the techno-managerial turn in aid. This paradigm requires local actors[1] to facilitate a high level of external project monitoring and control to ensure that the project adheres to donor/government requirements and is delivered on time and to the expected standard. Thus, the two paradigms pull in opposite directions. Local actors[1] are faced with the challenge of implementing the contradictory requirements of the resilience and surveillance paradigms, both of which are essential to convincing global and domestic audiences of the legitimacy of LCPA projects.

This paper is based on an analysis of a LCPA project in Ethiopia. However, its insights have implications for research and practice in the field of localisation and participatory aid beyond this setting. This is because all LCPA projects that require global or national level recognition face systemic pressures to accommodate both conflicting paradigms in their work. This paper has used a paradox perspective as a theoretical lens on legitimacy work to explore how this circle is squared in practice. It showed how in project design, project strategy was tailored to the logics of the resilience paradigm, which means that resilience-related objectives, such as local empowerment, self-reliance and ownership, were presented as necessary preconditions for achieving the project's main goal (in this case, reducing malnutrition). The implementation tools of the project, on the other hand, were designed to align with the logics of the surveillance paradigm, to ensure that the project met the sectoral standards and complied with the requirements of the donors and government. In a well-designed project model, the project implementation tools translate the project's high-level strategy into a series of inputs, activities and outputs that can be practically managed and executed. However, in this case, the strategy and implementation tools were in conflict. Legitimacy pressures and hierarchies came together to create an internally contradictory project model, whereby the 'bottom-up' strategy conflicted with the 'top-down' implementation of the project. They also created a situation where neither the strategy nor the implementation tools effectively addressed the project reality on the ground. This paradoxical situation is not something local actors[1] can solve at the level of the project because the conflicting legitimacy pressures and hierarchies operate at the level of sector.

This has important implications for LCPA legitimacy work. Substantive legitimacy work for an aid project entails developing a strategy on the basis of a theorised causal mechanism (or logic) tailored to the reality on the ground—and then validating that logic through implementation. However, when implementation is based on a competing set of ideas, the link between logic and practice cannot be made. The case study shows how this paradox was sidestepped. Here, legitimacy work was not substantive but purely symbolic: visual evidence was created that showed strong connections between logic, reality and implementation when, in reality, those connections were flimsy at best. As a result, a strategy was 'validated' through legitimacy work that was not actually used and that did not fully address the reality on the ground.

The fact that conflicting legitimacy pressures and hierarchies combine to make substantive legitimacy work impossible has significant implications for reform in the aid sector. This situation leads local[1] and community actors[2] to conduct purely symbolic legitimacy work (impression management), creating LCPA project 'evidence' that renders the problems with the current setup invisible. The 'advantage' to external drivers[10] of LCPA is that this evidence appears to show that it is possible to 'shift the power' without relinquishing control, obtaining the benefits of localisation and participation, whilst closely managing the aid processes that determine legitimacy. In other words, it appears to show that it is possible to empower communities, foster their self-reliance and create a sense of local ownership over aid, whilst maintaining a high level of external monitoring and control over the project. Because symbolic legitimacy work makes the problems with the current setup invisible, it obscures

[10] 'External drivers' refers to INGOs and national/federal government bodies (see Fig. 1).

the fact that achieving the desired outcomes for LCPA requires a radical restructuring of the power dynamics that exist within the aid sector. The implications for research and practice are that LCPA project data and information (including visuals) need to be analysed through a critical lens that accounts for the structural power dynamics that shape the creation of this 'project evidence'. A data justice lens is a useful tool for analysing how knowledge management in aid projects interlinks with existing inequalities, highlighting where project data and information may perpetuate a harmful status quo (Mulder 2023, 2020). With the current hierarchical setup, there is a risk that legitimacy work for LCPA will validate aid structures and processes that undermine the desired the outcomes envisioned for it. Processes of legitimation can be circular, resulting in the status quo being affirmed and recreated.

#### Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| INGO | International non-governmental organisation |
| LCPA | Local, community-based, participatory aid |

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#### Authors' contributions

Not applicable: this is a single-authored paper. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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#### Availability of data and materials

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

### Declarations

#### Competing interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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