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To cite this article: Olga Ulybina, Laia Pi Ferrer & Pertti Alasuutari (2023): Managing the crisis: International organisations' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic as legitimisation work, European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology, DOI: [10.1080/23254823.2023.2195479](https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2023.2195479)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23254823.2023.2195479>



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Published online: 30 Mar 2023.



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Managing the crisis: International organisations' responses to the COVID-19 pandemic as legitimisation work

Olga Ulybina ^a, Laia Pi Ferrer ^{a,b} and Pertti Alasuutari ^a

^aFaculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland; ^bInstitute for Advanced Family Studies, Universitat Internacional de Catalunya (UIC), Barcelona, Spain

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes legitimisation practices of international organisations in the face of the global COVID-19 pandemic. We analyse a sample of 252 major international governmental organisations (IGOs) and 250 international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), using information collected from their websites in September – December 2020. We seek to understand why the vast majority of both IGOs and INGOs responded to the crisis and what were the different types of reactions. We study variations in legitimisation practices among different types of organisations – governmental vs non-governmental, general-purpose vs task-specific, large vs small, etc. Drawing on rational choice and neo-institutionalist scholarship, we test several hypotheses to account for the patterns of IO's legitimisation work triggered by COVID-19 crisis. Our findings give some support to both theoretical perspectives. Organisation's resources are the best predictor for its conduct in response to the crisis. At the same time, organisations largely behave in a conformist way, actively engaging in legitimisation work, and investing in their public visibility in relation to COVID-19 pandemic.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 17 December 2021; Accepted 22 March 2023

KEYWORDS International organisations; COVID-19; legitimacy; legitimisation; rational choice; neo-institutionalism

Introduction

Since 2020, the world has been grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic. National governments throughout the world have introduced all kinds of policy measures to mitigate the spread of the pandemic and to ease its socio-economic consequences. Even though the COVID-19 outbreak

CONTACT Olga Ulybina  olga.ulybina@tuni.fi

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poses an ongoing challenge to the proper actions taken and the optimal timing to implement them (see Ferguson et al., 2020), unprecedented policy measures restricting individual behaviour and movements have been adopted across the world in a surprisingly homogenous manner despite presenting important differences in the number of cases (Capano et al., 2020; Sebhatu et al., 2020). However, national governments are not the only actors taking actions concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. Scientists in various disciplines have also quickly launched research projects studying the pandemic. Organisations specialised in health and pandemics such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) are also mitigating the pandemic by producing knowledge and recommendations that can be of use to decision-makers and the population at large. Furthermore, a large majority of international organisations (IOs), both intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), have responded to the pandemic one way or another, even if their regular activities and goals are unrelated to global health policy coordination and fighting the pandemic (Debre & Dijkstra, 2021; Ulybina et al., 2022).

Considering the overwhelming response to the COVID-19 pandemic also by IOs whose activities are unrelated to it, we suggest it is fair to say that at least some of those responses can be interpreted as attempts to be perceived as useful or visible in a situation where the whole world's attention is centred on a single thing. Since an IO's existence is in the last instance dependent on its members' and sponsors' conviction that the organisation serves its purpose and has authority – that is, influence on others' behaviour (on authority, see Alasuutari, 2018; Stroup & Wong, 2017; Zürn et al., 2012), all its activities can be considered as part of its legitimation strategies. For example, an IO may respond to the crisis by launching a special programme that seeks to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic. On the other hand, such behavioural legitimation (Deephouse et al., 2017; Halliday et al., 2010) by doing its best to serve its members in a changed situation, may not necessarily be sufficient, because legitimacy and authority are relational, dependent on perceptions. Organisations also need to pay attention to their visibility, public image, or branding (on branding, see e.g. Vestergaard, 2008). Hence, responses may also be purely cosmetic or symbolic (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990).

By analysing a representative sample of the most prestigious IGOs and INGOs, in this article we seek to account for IOs' legitimation practices in the face of the global COVID-19 crisis. We study why a vast majority

of both IGOs and INGOs responded to the crisis and what were the different types of reactions. To make the rationales behind IOs' responses to the crisis understandable, we also study how different types of IOs' differ from one another. Theoretically, we assess this issue from a rational choice perspective and neoinstitutionalist perspective. From a rational choice perspective, one could assume that, more dependent on their donors' support and public image, general-purpose organisations and INGOs are more likely to engage in all manner of legitimation practices, whereas special-purpose organisations' legitimation work depends on how closely their task relates to the pandemic. From a neoinstitutionalist perspective, on the other hand, the more resources an IO has, the more likely it will engage in both behavioural and symbolic legitimation practices.

The findings of this article are based on the information collected from the websites of analysed organisations in September–December 2020. In the next sections, we review relevant literature on factors that affect IOs' legitimation practices. Then, after describing our data and methods, we present and discuss the results.

Rational choices and conformism in IOs' legitimation work

Legitimacy, i.e. being perceived as a rightful actor carrying out appropriate activities (Dingwerth et al., 2019, p. 31; Zürn & Stephen, 2010), is important for all IOs, both IGOs and INGOs, which compete for attention, funding and power (Hurd, 2019; Ossewaarde et al., 2008; Schmitz, 2020; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). It has even been argued that legitimacy is the only resource that IOs have for maintaining their authority (Dingwerth et al., 2019, p. 33).

Given that legitimation is based on an appeal to the common interest of the collective (Zürn & Stephen, 2010), major crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic can create an urgent need, as well as a fruitful ground, for pursuing legitimation strategies. In other words, it seems reasonable to expect that a large portion of organisations will engage in legitimation work and self-promotion in response to COVID-19 pandemic one way or another.

Scholarship in this area, however, suggests that the legitimation needs of IGOs and INGOs are somewhat different. Zürn and Stephen (2010) note that IGOs have been experiencing a growing demand for legitimation. To compete successfully, they try to boost their own legitimacy in the eyes of funding providers, the public, and other stakeholders (Bexell et al., 2020). In other words, they are engaged in legitimation work

(Tallberg & Zürn, 2019). Some IGOs are acknowledged in international law, and states have committed themselves to their norms in some ways, but for the most part legitimacy is a question of respect and reputation, closely tied to third-party perceptions that the organisation acts according to current norms – not only legal, but also moral, social, cultural, etc. On the other hand, for INGOs, reputation is even more important. Because they get a significant proportion of their funding from individual private donors and civil society organisations, they need to care about their public legitimacy and reputation to maintain sponsors' confidence, and thus, ensure their survival (Verbruggen et al., 2011; Wiepking & Maas, 2009). According to Suchman (1995), organisational legitimacy literature can be divided into two traditions: strategic approaches to legitimacy and institutional approaches. While the strategic approaches conceive legitimacy as a managerial perspective based on the organisation's instrumental deployment of evocative symbols in order to have social support, the institutional approaches understand legitimacy as a result of cultural pressure that goes beyond the organisation's intentional control. Although legitimacy can be seen through the lens of a rational and/or institutional framework, the debate on how certain changes and actions can be attributed to one of these two has been a question of lively debate and research (see e.g. Kraatz & Zajac, 1996). On that basis, from a rational choice perspective, we expect INGOs to be more likely to use the COVID-19 pandemic as a legitimisation opportunity than IGOs.

Then again, IOs represent a highly heterogeneous set of organisations, with varying needs in public legitimisation. In this respect, following the categorisation applied to IGOs, we suggest that there are two types of organisations, task-specific and general-purpose IOs (Lenz et al., 2014), which face diverging needs. Task-specific IOs do not focus on the interests of their members but rather on shared problems in a particular policy domain. This is the case, for example, with the International Whaling Commission, International Organization for Migration, International Maritime Organization (IGOs); World Organization against Torture, and Human Rights Watch (INGOs). These kind of organisations have a relatively narrow target audience and may not feel the need to interact with the public and to boost their public legitimacy to the same extent (Lenz et al., 2014). General-purpose IOs, on the other hand, have a broad policy scope and they focus on the provision of public goods for a particular transnational community. IGOs such as the EU, the African Union, the Benelux Community, the Caribbean Community, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (IGOs), BRAC, Acted,

and Mercy Corps (INGOs) belong to this category. Their portfolio may include dealing with trade or security problems, alongside environmental issues, healthcare, human rights, etc. (Lenz et al., 2014, p. 132). In other words, general-purpose IOs tend to be umbrella organisations, with a broad spectrum of policy issues on the agenda. Hence it can be assumed that, on average, they are more concerned with their reputation and legitimacy in the eyes of the general public.

On that basis, we hypothesize that general-purpose organisations are more than task-specific organisations engaged in publicising their role in the pandemic-induced crisis. Related to that we assume that among task-specific IOs, those whose tasks are directly related to the pandemic are more likely to take an active role in the crisis than others.

Researchers have proposed different ways to classify sources of IOs' legitimacy and hence, different types of legitimation practices. Thus, Scholte (2019) distinguishes between three major bases of legitimacy: institutional (relating to 'procedure, performance, purpose, and personality'), individual (relating to identity, interest, emotion, social trust, and political knowledge), and societal (relating to prevailing norms, modernity, capitalism, discourse, a hegemonic state, and social stratification). In relation to INGOs specifically, Ossewaarde et al. (2008) identify four dimensions of legitimacy: normative (showing compliance with prevalent societal norms and ideals), regulatory (showing compliance with international law), cognitive (ability to show that they are cognitively capable of acting on behalf of the stated mission), and output legitimacy (ability to show the effectuation of their missions to their stakeholders). Furthermore, Ashforth and Gibbs (1990, p. 178) make a distinction between symbolic and substantive legitimation. Symbolic legitimation depicts actions aimed at transforming the meaning of acts to make them look consistent with current values and ideas or expectations, whereas substantive legitimation means 'real, material changes in organisational goals, structures, and processes or social institutionalised practices' (1990, p. 180). Other scholars have proposed a similar distinction between discursive (or rhetorical, or verbal) and behavioural legitimation (Deephouse et al., 2017; Halliday et al., 2010; Tallberg & Zürn, 2019).

The scholars mentioned above note that a distinction separating symbolic from substantive or discursive from behavioural legitimation practices is empirically challenging because they tend to go together. When studying a large sample of IOs, it is also practically impossible for researchers to make first-hand observations about what each IO does in real life. One must rely on the organisation's own description, which

can also be considered as symbolic or discursive legitimation. In any case, in this study we treat information found on IOs' websites about them mitigating the pandemic, alleviating its harmful effects, producing knowledge about COVID-19, or publishing instructions about how to manage the situation as behavioural legitimation, whereas purely verbal references to the pandemic are treated as symbolic legitimation.

As to different types of symbolic legitimation, from a rational choice perspective it can be inferred that general-purpose and special-purpose organisations are likely to pursue different legitimation strategies. Following Tallberg and Zürn (2019), we hypothesize that task-specific organisations are more likely to legitimize their activities regarding the pandemic with reference to their purpose, whereas general-purpose organisations are more likely to legitimize themselves with reference to universally shared principles such as democracy, participation, transparency, and rights protection.

The scholarship within sociological institutionalism opens another perspective on legitimacy and legitimation. Rather than focusing on different types of actors' diverging interests that result in differing legitimation strategies, neo-institutionalist world society theory (WST) emphasizes that actors are conformist: they tend to behave similarly to others. Since IOs' legitimacy and authority are relational, 'conferred by others' (Dingwerth et al., 2019, p. 32) or 'socially embedded' (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019), organisations seek to justify their existence and activities in terms of predominant beliefs, values, and norms. This conformism has led to growing isomorphism amongst all manner of organisations. According to Meyer and Bromley (2013), recent decades have witnessed a rapid growth of formal organisation in all social sectors the world over. For example, an increasing number of non-profits want to call themselves NGOs rather than, say, charities or churches. This also means that all types of IOs look similar and want to be seen as powerful global actors. Although they have little sanctioning power over government policies, IGOs and INGOs 'act as if they were authorised in the strongest possible terms' (Boli & Thomas, 1999, p. 37), creating the image of themselves as official representatives of stakeholder groups who play a key role in governance. Therefore, as general respect for an actor is based on a shared belief in the actor's importance, authority can be considered as epistemic capital that actors accumulate from various kinds: capacity-based, ontological, moral, and charismatic authority (Alasuutari, 2018).

Research in the WST tradition maintains, though, that growing isomorphism is restricted to stated principles and formal organisational

structures, whereas actual practices may significantly deviate from the rhetoric used to proffer IOs' legitimacy. There are conflicts between normative demands on the one hand and material or technical restrictions on the other (Von Billerbeck, 2020). This can often result in 'organized hypocrisy' (Brunsson, 1989), meaning that to manage these inconsistencies, organisations comply with normative demands symbolically while simultaneously undertaking actions that contradict those norms, a process Meyer and Rowan (1977) call decoupling. When behavioural legitimation work is difficult, for example because of scarce resources, conformity is performed symbolically, leading to hypocrisy and to decoupling between stated principles and actual practices, or between actions and their actual significance (Alasuutari, 2015; Brandtner, 2021; Bromley & Powell, 2012).

From this perspective, it can be predicted that IOs seek to enhance their legitimacy and authority in every way possible for them, regardless of the type of the IO or what it is initially tasked to do. Whereas from a rational choice perspective it could be hypothesized that task-specific organisations with little to do with the pandemic do not waste their resources on the issue, from the neoinstitutionalist viewpoint we expect to see that the more resources an IO has, the more likely it responds to the COVID-19 pandemic in various ways.

Data and methods

We analysed a sample of 252 IGOs and 250 INGOs. The list of IGOs was retrieved from the online version of the Yearbook of International Organizations, accessed in October–November 2020. It includes two types of IGOs: universal membership organisations or intercontinental membership organisations (76 IGOs in total); and 'regionally defined membership organisations' (214 IGOs in total). The list of INGOs is based on the Top 500 NGOs list (2020 edition) provided by the media organisation *NGO Advisor* (<https://www.ngoadvisor.net/>). For our analysis, we selected the first top 250 INGOs from the 2020 ranking list. Using the above ranking means that the INGOs we analyse are widely regarded as influential, looked up to as sources of international best practice.

For each organisation, data were gathered about the organisation itself and how it related itself and responded to the COVID-19 crisis. To do so, we collected and coded the data on organisational size; responses to previous pandemics (since these responses characterised organisations prior to COVID-19 pandemic); and the policy scope of the organisation. The

data for the latter characteristic were collected and coded somewhat differently for IGOs and INGOs: IGOs were coded on the basis of their aims as task-specific or general-purpose organisations; INGOs were coded according to the number of sectors they work in. Some additional characteristics were coded only for IGOs or for INGOs (for more detail see Table A1 in [Appendix A](#)).

We collected data on how organisations publicly engaged with and responded to COVID-19 crisis and approached these reactions from the viewpoint of legitimisation work. We treat websites as an incorporation of public legitimisation strategy. To capture different types of engagement with and responses to the COVID-19 crisis, we collected, conducted content analysis, and coded the following data for each organisation: (a) verbal reactions to COVID-19 crisis: statements justifying the importance of the organisation to mitigating the crisis; statements reminding of the organisation's mission in the context of COVID-19 crisis but not necessarily relevant to mitigating the crisis; statements about organisational compliance with some national or international COVID-19 related regulations; (b) provision of material support to third parties; (c) running educational and awareness raising projects; (d) issuing guidelines to third parties; (e) producing knowledge; and (f) sharing third party information (for more details see Table A2 in [Appendix A](#)). We used inductive coding, i.e. the coding scheme was derived from the data, defined and modified during the preliminary analysis. Data for each type of response were coded in a binary way: yes (1) or no (0), and the coding was done by two authors. Given that this study is a website-based assessment, we discuss the publicly visible responses of organisations to the COVID-19 crisis. Given the variation in the structure and design of webpages, we only analyse the content of webpages and ignore the potentially varying visibility of relevant messages, such as their position within the website, font and colour. Similarly, even though the institutional environment of the organisations may play an important role in explaining their responses and behaviour, systematizing and comparing the environments of all the organisations in detail is challenging. Hence, we do not code the environment of the organisations. Possible internal organisational changes that have not been publicised are not discussed in this paper.

Differences between IOs in responding to the crisis

An overview of the data, 252 IGOs and 250 INGOs, shows that the pandemic indeed aroused a lot of interest among the organisations. A large

majority of both IGOs and INGOs responded to the pandemic one way or another. And as we expected, INGOs' response rate (88%) was significantly higher than that of IGOs (60%, see [Table 1](#)). This is in line with the first hypothesis according to which INGOs have a bigger need for legitimation and hence to respond to the crisis one way or another.

As to the different types of organisations, we hypothesized that general-purpose organisations are more than task-specific organisations engaged in publicising their role in the pandemic-induced crisis. To test this hypothesis, we applied this typology originally created to categorise IGOs (Lenz et al., 2014) also to INGOs. We categorised INGOs that have less than four sectors of activity as task-specific and the rest (four or more) as general-purpose organisations.

The analysis showed that policy scope of the organisation was particularly significant for IGOs. General-purpose IGOs were more likely to relate themselves to the pandemic. The response rate of general-purpose IGOs was 91% (39/43), whereas that of task-specific IGOs was 43% (63/145). This difference is statistically significant ($p = 0.004$). Amongst INGOs, the difference between general-purpose (84%, 58/69), and task-specific INGOs (86%, 155/181) was statistically insignificant ($p = 0.84$) and it went against the hypothesis.

From a rational choice perspective, we also hypothesized that organisations whose tasks had to do with combating epidemics would be more likely to respond to COVID-19. IOs tasked to fight health-related issues would be an example, but it is important to note that epidemics have wide effects on societies, for example through their economic impact. Therefore, we used an organisation's prior behaviour as a proxy: it could be assumed that IOs which responded to previous viral diseases are more likely to respond to this one as well. Therefore, we coded which IOs responded to previous major epidemics taking place after the turn of the twenty-first century (severe acute respiratory syndrome [SARS] in 2003, Influenza A H1N5 [bird flu] in 2007, H1N1 [swine flu] in 2009, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome [MERS] in 2012, Ebola in 2014, Zika virus in 2015-2016, HIV/AIDS). The results confirm the hypothesis: both IGOs and INGOs that responded to

Table 1. Mentions of COVID-19 on the organisations' websites.

Type of organisation	Proportion of organisations
INGOs	88% (220/250)
IGOs	60% (151/252)

epidemics in the past were more likely to relate to COVID-19, and the associations were statistically significant in both cases ($p < 0.001$).

On the other hand, the comparison to earlier viral diseases highlights the overwhelming attention that COVID-19 has attracted among all IOs, also those who ignored previous health-related phenomena. While only a minority (48%) of IGOs responded to at least one of the above-mentioned epidemics, now more than a half (55%) of those who ignored previous viral diseases reacted to COVID-19 one way or another. This implies that conforming to what others do, predicted by new institutionalism, best explains IOs' behaviour.

The characteristics of IOs that best predict whether and how an organisation responded to the pandemic also suggest that conformism is the best explanation for IOs' conduct in the crisis that COVID-19 caused (Tables 2 and 3). In the tables we report Cramer's V, a measure of association on a scale 0–1 between the two variables, calculated from the underlying 2×2 contingency table (where 0 means no association between the variables, and 1 means complete association). The tables report on correlations between six types of responses by three variables: size, policy scope, response to past epidemics. They also report the p value calculated by Fisher's exact test.

Amongst IGOs, bigger organisations and those that have responded to previous epidemics were more likely to respond to COVID-19 in any of the types listed in the table. Furthermore, general-purpose IGOs were more likely to react by sharing third-party knowledge, giving material

Table 2. Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by different types of IGOs.

Type of response	Size (small vs large)	Policy scope (task-specific vs general-purpose)	Responded to previous epidemics (Yes vs No)
Symbolic statements	0.294 p value < 0.001	0.110 p value 0.094	0.391 p value < 0.001
Sharing third party knowledge	0.33 p value < 0.001	0.211 p value 0.001	0.381 p value < 0.001
Material support	0.353 p value < 0.001	0.228 p value < 0.001	0.327 p value < 0.001
Running educational & awareness raising projects	0.349 p value < 0.001	0.213 p value 0.001	0.38 p value < 0.001
Issuing guidelines	0.436 p value < 0.001	0.02 p value 0.852	0.317 p value < 0.001
Producing knowledge	0.372 p value < 0.001	0.13 p value 0.041	0.337 p value < 0.001

Table 3. Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by different types of INGOs.

Type of response	Size	Policy scope	Response to past epidemics
Symbolic statements	0.148 (0.021)	0.043 (0.569)	0.189 (0.004)
Sharing third party knowledge	0.058 (0.361)	0.068 (0.28)	0.115 (0.086)
Material support	0.261 (<0.001)	0.236 (<0.001)	0.276 (<0.001)
Running educational & awareness raising projects	0.156 (0.014)	0.033 (0.604)	0.192 (0.003)
Issuing guidelines	0.135 (0.045)	0.113 (0.088)	0.076 (0.232)
Producing knowledge	0.032 (0.656)	0.033 (0.605)	0.243 (<0.001)

support, running educational and awareness raising projects and producing knowledge (Table 2).

The importance of an organisation's resources is also visible when considering INGOs (Table 3). While the likelihood that an INGO engages in symbolic legitimation is not significantly associated with the organisation's characteristics, a bigger size, large policy scope, and response to past epidemics all have a significant association with the organisation providing material support. Furthermore, an INGO's size and reacting to previous epidemics also increases the likelihood that it launches educational and awareness raising projects. All these associations are to some extent capacity issues.

Overall, rather than policy scope, both IGOs' and INGOs' engagement with the COVID-19 pandemic correlates particularly with their capacity. To put it simply, regardless of the IOs' primary scope, they responded to the pandemic one way or another, depending on how much they could invest resources into it. If nothing that can be categorised as behavioural legitimation, an organisation used the opportunity to make itself visible in the pandemic centred public discourse by resorting to symbolic legitimation.

Types of symbolic legitimation

As an indication of a concerted response to the COVID-19 pandemic, IOs seem to perform behavioural legitimation if their resources allow it, but various forms of symbolic legitimation show conformism in the face of the crisis even clearer. On the basis of rational choice theory, we expected to see that IGOs differed from INGOs and general-purpose from task-specific IOs in how they resorted to symbolic legitimation. The results of empirical analyses showed, however, that the differences between IOs were small. Different types of IOs acted very

similarly, conforming to evolving worldwide norms regarding symbolic responses to the pandemic.

In going through the data, we identified three types of statements representing symbolic legitimation: (1) statements of the organisation's importance ('We help solve the crisis'), (2) statements reminding of the organisation's mission ('We are important despite the crisis'), and statements of the organisation's compliance with some national or international COVID-19 related regulations ('We comply').

Let us take a press release of the International Atomic Energy Agency (4 June 2020) as an example of the first type, 'We help solve the crisis':

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has so far delivered more than 250 consignments to 80 countries with supplies to help fight against the COVID-19 pandemic [...] "One hundred and twenty countries turned to us for help. We mounted the biggest operation of assistance in the history of the IAEA," said IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi. "This is emergency assistance and the effort is going to continue. I am encouraging countries and entities in a position to do so to contribute in this endeavour." [...] the IAEA is also providing personal protective equipment (PPE) and offering webinars and video guidance for health and laboratory professionals on sample collection and processing.

What we see here is behavioural legitimation (through provision of material support, webinars and guidance) linked with symbolic legitimation, evident in the press release highlighting the significance of their effort, sustainability and reliability of their organisation, and their authority as a source of expertise and guidance. The IAEA is portrayed as a responsive organisation, which is ready to help when needed and which is also perceived by others as such: 'One hundred and twenty countries turned to us for help.'

Similar claims about playing important roles in mitigating the crisis are made not only by other IGOs but also INGOs, as seen from the below quote from Wikimedia foundation (<https://wikimediafoundation.org/covid19/#section-1>):

How we can help in this time of uncertainty? Everything that happens in the world happens on Wikipedia. And when things happen, we know the world looks our way for clear, neutral, and reliable information. We honor this responsibility every day, and its importance has only been amplified by the unprecedented global COVID-19 pandemic. In this challenging time, our utmost priority has been and will continue to be keeping Wikipedia online and available for the world. Wikipedia will be there for students who are learning at home, people who are sheltering in place, and anyone who needs a

trusted source of unbiased information. Throughout these troubling times, knowledge must and will remain open for all.

The excerpt exemplifies symbolic legitimation, where the INGO stresses not only their eagerness to help in this crisis, but also the crucial role they play as a reliable source of information.

The second type of symbolic legitimation, ‘We are important despite the crisis,’ comprises statements reminding of the organisation’s mission. The following statement of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (14 April 2020) is one example:

While the eyes of the world are on the novel coronavirus, East Africa continues to struggle with another crisis of biblical proportions: growing swarms of ravenous locusts. Both crises are extraordinary in scale, and both foes multiply so quickly that governments are struggling to contain them. But times of crisis are also times of innovation and collaboration. And just like scientists around the world are racing to find ways to contend with COVID-19, international researchers have joined forces with FAO to create new tools to stay one step ahead of the itinerant locusts. Such tools are becoming even more relevant as restrictions associated with COVID-19 are posing new obstacles for response teams.

Here, the organisation refers to the COVID-19 pandemic to underscore the organisation’s resilience in the face of the pandemic and ability to perform despite the crisis, and to better visualise the issues the organisation addresses and the scale of its efforts by using the COVID-19 pandemic as a comparison.

In a similar vein, the INGO Waterkeepers highlights the continued importance of their work at the time of the pandemic: ‘Waterkeepers continue to fight for clean water, even in the face of COVID-19.’ (22 April 2020)

The third type of symbolic legitimation, ‘We comply’, comprise statements of the organisation’s compliance with national or international COVID-19 related regulations and guidelines. For example, on its website the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) states on 13 March 2020 that it ‘implements COVID-19 related measures’, highlighting that their director-general ‘adopted several measures based on the new guidance announced by the Dutch health authorities and the World Health Organisation’s characterisation of the spread of the virus as a pandemic’, pertaining to contingency staffing, meetings and travel. The adoption of measures was thus justified through compliance with third-party guidelines and decisions,

rather than for example organisation's own deliberation to ensure their staff health and safety or economic feasibility.

INGOs also perform this type of symbolic legitimation, as seen from the following quote by One Acre Fund (14 May 2020), highlighting the importance of following official recommendations:

In all of the countries we serve, agriculture had been designated an essential service, but for farmers to work unhindered, we needed to incorporate government and World Health Organization guidelines on COVID-19 prevention into our operations, especially in the field.

The above shows that organisations resort to different legitimation strategies: 'positive' legitimation in order to gain authority and/or resources (exemplified by statements along the lines of 'We help solve the crisis' and 'We are important despite the crisis') versus blame avoidance strategy, to prevent any loss of legitimacy (manifested in statements along the lines of 'We comply'). The observed legitimation practices reflect the importance of different dimensions of legitimacy (Ossewaarde et al. (2008)), such as the regulatory dimension in the case of 'We comply' and the output dimension in the case of 'We help solve the crisis'.

Table 4 reports how prevalent different types of symbolic legitimation were among IGOs and INGOs. Through various statements, organisations explicitly related themselves to the global efforts of mitigating the crisis, trying to persuade the public of the relevance of their organisation in the new circumstances and to reassure their compliance with new pandemic-related regulations. Considering that a significantly larger share of INGOs than IGOs responded to the pandemic one way or another, it is somewhat surprising that IGOs resorted to all types of symbolic legitimation more commonly than INGOs. Since the research literature in this area maintains that INGOs are very dependent on their public image, this seems to suggest that a large proportion of them engaged in projects categorised as behavioural legitimation, and did not make a big deal out of it by emphasizing their role in managing the crisis.

Table 4. Types of symbolic legitimation of IGOs and INGOs.

Type of symbolic legitimation	IGOs, %	INGOs, %	<i>p</i> value
Statements of organisational importance to mitigating the crisis ('We help solve the crisis')	31	18.4	0.000535
Statements reminding of the organisation's mission	37.3	26.4	0.004011
Statements of the organisation's compliance with some national or international COVID-19 related regulations	22.6	9.6	3.69E-05

Differences in types of symbolic legitimization between IOs of different size and policy scope tell the same story of conformism that was discussed in the previous section (see [Tables 5 and 6](#)). As seen in [Table 5](#), big IGOs tended to discuss their role in tackling the crisis and highlight the importance of their mission, even in the new, post-pandemic world – more than declaring compliance with pandemic-related regulations and guidelines. Furthermore, IGOs that responded to pandemics in the past were more likely than others to portray themselves as having an important role in mitigating the crisis. This effect is possibly due to the larger capacity of previously responding organisations, meaning that they were better placed to provide additional pandemic-related services, and larger PR resources, capable of producing more extensive pandemic-dedicated publicity, going beyond short statements of compliance. Among INGOs, size or response to past pandemics did not seem to affect their symbolic legitimization choices ([Table 6](#)).

Policy scope did not seem to have an impact on types of symbolic legitimization either among IGOs or INGOs. As predicted by the neoinstitutionalist theory, this implies that, conforming to a uniform response to the crisis best explains the IOs' conduct. Unlike predicted in previous research, task-specific organisations were not more likely than general-

Table 5. Types of symbolic legitimization among IGOs.

Type of symbolic legitimization	Size	Policy scope	Response to past pandemics
Statement of organisational importance to mitigating the crisis ('We help solve the crisis')	0.321 (<0.001)	0.102 (0.148)	0.358 (<0.001)
Statement reminding of the organisation's mission	0.397 (<0.001)	0.146 (0.025)	0.312 (<0.001)
Statement of the organisation's compliance with some national or international COVID-19 related regulations	0.131 (0.076)	0.027 (0.692)	0.21 (0.001)

Table 6. Types of symbolic legitimization among INGOs.

Type of symbolic legitimization	Size	Policy scope	Response to past pandemics
Statement of organisational importance to mitigating the crisis ('We help solve the crisis')	0.056 (0.413)	0.007 (0.912)	0.092 (0.148)
Statement reminding of the organisation's mission	0.078 (0.247)	0.086 (0.176)	0.109 (0.103)
Statement of the organisation's compliance with some national or international COVID-19 related regulations	0.09 (0.195)	0.08 (0.208)	0.169 (0.008)

purpose organisations to stress their role in mitigating the effects of the pandemic and solving other issues relevant for their target audiences. Instead, general-purpose and task-specific organisations pursued similar symbolic legitimation strategies, and they mostly did so by appealing to the shared pandemic-induced problems, their own ability to solve those problems, as well as the importance of their organisational mission.

In some cases, the remarkable breadth and uniformity by which all kinds of IOs responded to the pandemic also resulted in somewhat absurd attempts to argue how and why an organisation is relevant in the COVID-19 situation. For example, the International Cotton Advisory Committee issued (22 June 2020) a ‘Huge Special Issue of The ICAC Recorder [which] Focusses Exclusively on COVID-19 Pandemic’, with highlights including for example ‘Nearly 100 pages of COVID-specific content from 25 cotton experts.’ Another example of this kind can be found at the International Pepper Community: ‘Black Pepper is widely acclaimed for its ability to boost the immune system. Being an international agency in the field of pepper, we think it is our moral responsibility to inform all about the great support pepper can give in your fight against the Coronavirus.’ As the quote shows, the organisation re-packages their services as fighting disease. By relating their work to COVID-19, the IO tries to attach a new meaning to their activities, thereby implying that the leadership considers the previously defined mission to not be sufficiently significant, appropriate, or legitimate in the new situation.

To take another example, like many other IOs, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) shared third party information on COVID-19. As a Vienna-based organisation, they shared the ‘Latest information from the Austrian and Viennese authorities’, such as ‘Advice from the VIC Medical Service: What to do if you have respiratory symptoms and are concerned about having COVID-19, If you test positive for COVID-19, If your family members test positive for COVID-19, Taking care of yourself and your family, Is it allergy or is it COVID-19?’ It is understandable that such information is highly relevant for the staff of the organisation. However, it seems unlikely that any external stakeholders would access the IAEA’s office in search of this information and would not seek advice from Austrian medical authorities. So, the usefulness of publishing such third-party information on IAEA’s website can be questioned and it appears to primarily serve legitimation.

Conclusion and discussion

In this study we have tested different hypotheses to account for the patterns found in IOs' legitimation work triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. From a rational choice perspective, we assumed that differences between the conduct of various types of organisations could be explained by their varying interests and need for legitimation. Hence, since it has been argued that INGOs are more dependent on their public image, we expected them to be more likely to use the COVID-19 pandemic as a legitimation opportunity than IGOs. We also expected to find that general-purpose organisations are more than task-specific organisations engaged in publicising their role in the pandemic-induced crisis. We also hypothesized that among task-specific IOs, those whose tasks are directly related to the pandemic are more likely to take an active role in the crisis than others. Furthermore, we expected to see that task-specific organisations are more likely to legitimize their activities regarding the pandemic with reference to their purpose, whereas general-purpose organisations are more likely to legitimize themselves with reference to universally shared principles such as democracy, participation, transparency, and rights protection. On the other hand, from a neoinstitutionalist perspective it could be assumed that IOs act relatively homogeneously in the face of the situation in which the entire world's attention is centred on the pandemic, meaning that other issues are left in its shadow. Therefore, from this perspective it could be hypothesized that IOs respond to the situation quite uniformly, aligning themselves with the norms that become prevalent and hegemonic, using the resources at their disposal to be seen as actors whose activities help mitigate the effects of the pandemic. Accordingly, we hypothesized that the more resources an IO has, the more likely it responds to the COVID-19 pandemic in various ways.

The analysis gave some support to hypotheses derived from a rational choice perspective. The INGOs' response rate was significantly higher than that of IGOs. In line with rational choice assumptions, general-purpose IGOs were more likely to react to the pandemic than task-specific IGOs. On the whole, however, an organisation's resources were the best predictor for its conduct in response to the crisis: the more an IO could invest in being visible on this front, the more likely it was to engage in both behavioural and symbolic legitimation of all kinds.

In some cases, this eagerness to make themselves visible and to appear relevant, led to absurd rhetoric. This is in accordance with

neoinstitutionalist scholarship, which maintains that organisations are conformist in their behaviour. Being part of the same global organisational field, IOs want to be seen as professional, authoritative, and legitimate actors, competing for public attention and recognition with several other organisations. According to existing research, recent decades have witnessed a growing need among both IGOs and INGOs for managing their visibility and public image. Based on his study, Ecker-Ehrhardt (2018a, 2018b) argues that self-legitimation via managing public discourse has become an organisational priority for IGOs in the face of increased levels of societal awareness, activism, and contestation by civil society actors. Consequently, IGOs have been expanding their communication departments to respond to the pressures towards institutional visibility. In a similar vein, Stroup and Wong (2017) argue that INGOs struggle to achieve status as leading INGOs in order to achieve their social change goals. However, maintaining status makes them avoid radical positions that might alienate policymakers or other constituencies. Therefore, they tend to conform to embracing widely shared views and principles.

In this instance, we do not think it is problematic to give some credit to both rational choice and neoinstitutionalist theories, because they are not necessarily contradictory. As Marshall W. Meyer (1987) notes, if it is commonly believed that an organisational action is a rational solution to a problem, it can be considered as a rational choice regardless of its consequences for efficiency. Similarly, an IO selflessly tackling the COVID-19 crisis within the available resources can be considered as a rational choice from various viewpoints, although its actual effect can be negligible.

Our study has its limitations, primarily because of the challenges of data collection. First, it is a website-based assessment, and we focused on public legitimation strategies. It is possible that organisations introduced various internal changes without publicising them – and that the patterns of their internal strategies varied from their public legitimation strategies – which could provide a different picture of organisational responses to the pandemic. Second, we did not account for the role of the organisational environment which could be an important factor in organisational behaviour, e.g. relevant international and national institutions, network membership, and behaviour of their sponsors. Future studies could fill these gaps and collect data through interviews. This will help understand how (a) publicly visible responses relate to internal organisational changes, and (b) the factors that shape organisational behaviour in crises.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland, project 'Epistemic capital in the synchronisation of national policies (EXTENDED): The effects of COVID-19'; Kulttuurin ja Yhteiskunnan Tutkimuksen Toimikunta.

ORCID

Olga Ulybina  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0186-5658>

Laia Pi Ferrer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8655-591X>

Pertti Alasuutari  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4111-9641>

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Appendix A

Table A1. Collecting and coding data about international organisations.

Variable	Operationalization	Source of the data	Coding scheme
Size of the organisation	Number of staff	online directory devex.com, Yearbook of International Organizations, organisations' webpages, annual reports (IGOs) NGO advisor information, LinkedIn (INGOs)	For IGOs: 0 – less than 100 staff, 1 – 100 staff or more For INGOs: 1- 1 to 10 staff, 2- 11 to 50 staff, 3-51 to 200, 4- 201 to 500 staff, 5- 501 to 1000 staff, 6- 1001 to 5000, 7- 5001-10,000 staff, 8- more than 10,000 staff
Aims of the organisation	Mention of health issues in the aims of the organisation	Yearbook of International Organizations (IGOs) NGO advisor information (INGOs)	0 – Health issues NOT mentioned, 1- health issues mentioned
Policy scope of the organisation	General purpose or task-specific organisation*	Yearbook of International Organizations (IGOs) NGO advisor information (INGOs)	0 – general purpose, 1- task-specific IGOs: coding on aims INGOs: coding based on the amount of sectors of activity (classification provided by NGO advisor information) Task-specific: 1–3 sectors of activity General purpose: 4–15 sectors of activity
Funding sources of the organisation (for IGOs only)	Sources of funding (member states or other)	Yearbook of International Organizations; websites of analysed IGOs	IGOs: 0 – a significant share is funded through contributions of member states, 1 – does not include or includes insignificant contributions of member states
NGOs holding consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)	Non, General, Special and Roster	Database of organisations in Consultative Status with ECOSOC and other accreditations (INGOs only)	0 – Non, 1- General, 2- Special, 3- Roster
Headquarters location	Location of the organisation's headquarters	NGO advisor information (INGOs only)	1- Europe, 2- North America, 3- Asia, 4- Oceania, 5- Africa, 6- South America
Year of foundation	Year of foundation of the organisation	NGO advisor information (INGOs only)	1- before 1975, 2- from 1975 to 1999, 3- from 2000 onwards

(Continued)

Table A1. Continued.

Variable	Operationalization	Source of the data	Coding scheme
Response to previous pandemics	Does the organisation mention any of the following pandemics on its website: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003, Influenza A H5N1 (bird flu) in 2007 ('influenza', 'bird flu', 'H5N1'), H1N1 (swine flu) in 2009 ('swine', H1N1), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in 2012 (MERS), Ebola in 2014 ('Ebola'), Zika virus in 2015–2016 ('Zika'), HIV/AIDS	Websites of the analysed organisations * All previous pandemics were searched only prior to 2020 (2019 inclusive) to avoid data contamination, as past pandemics have often been mentioned in relation to COVID-19	0 – None of the previous pandemic mentioned, 1 -at least one of the previous pandemics mentioned

* The typology is based on Lenz et al., 2014.

Table A2. Collecting data about organisational responses to COVID-19 crisis.

Type of response	Operationalization	Examples
Statement of organisational importance to mitigating the crisis ('We help solving the crisis')	Statement explaining/justifying the organisation's importance to mitigating the crisis.	IGO: 'CottonStopsCovid'. Keshav Kranthi, Joy Das, Rakesh Kumar, Mike McCue, Renuka Dhandapani, Kater Hake, Sandhya Kranthi, D. Blaise and Kai Hughes. 2020. The role of cotton in face masks. Brochure. ICAC, Washington, DC. May 2020. (International Cotton Advisory Committee) 'Over 100 countries requested support from the IAEA in detecting and controlling the increasing number of COVID-19 infections, including with real time RT-PCR. The IAEA, in part through funding contributions from Member States, provided a range of support, from diagnostic equipment and protective gear to sharing of expertise and training.' (International Atomic Energy Agency) 'In the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the attendant economic crisis, a number of leading UNIDROIT instruments may be of interest to a wide array of actors currently facing serious challenges to address contractual disruptions and to rebuild the economy in the post COVID-19 scenario.' (International Institute for the Unification of Private Law) 'The Cold Chain: A logistical challenge at the heart of the

(Continued)

Table A2. Continued.

Type of response	Operationalization	Examples
'We are important despite the crisis'	Statement reminding of the organisation's mission	<p>distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine' (International Institute of Refrigeration)</p> <p>INGO: 'Praekelt.org was uniquely positioned to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic after 12 years of experience in digital health' (Praekelt foundation).</p> <p>'The current pandemic presents a unique opportunity for IDC and its members to further support adapting ATD to the realities of Covid-19, and managing releases from immigration detention into ATD. More importantly, lessons learned from processes, challenges, and impacts during the health crisis, will be key to securing the sustainability of promising responses beyond Covid-19, and showcasing how migration can be governed without immigration detention' (International detention coalition)</p> <p>IGO: 'With the COVID-19 emergency, East Africa continues to struggle with another crisis – the locust upsurge.' (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations)</p> <p>'In this time of worldwide distress ... due to the COVID-19 pandemic, if the benefits that the OIML – together with its solid international legal metrology framework – can contribute to deliver confidence and eliminate a degree of worry, then this is a good thing.' (International Organization of Legal Metrology)</p> <p>'Now more than ever is the time for bold international cooperation to bridge the energy access gap and place sustainable energy at the heart of economic stimulus and recovery measures. IRENA is committed to scale up action with its global membership' (International Renewable Energy Agency)</p> <p>INGO: 'Diseases do not quarantine. Blood centres are empty, which means that someone will be left without a life-saving blood transfusion. #STAY A DONOR' (Donorsearch)</p> <p>IGO: 'All Rome-based FAO staff is now working remotely from home in</p>
'We comply'	Statement of the organisation's compliance with some	

(Continued)

Table A2. Continued.

Type of response	Operationalization	Examples
	national or international COVID-19 related regulations	<p>accordance with guidelines provided by the Italian Government.' (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations)</p> <p>'Based on recommendations of WHO, the IOM issued a circular letter in Jan 2020 ...' (International Maritime Organization)</p> <p>INGO: 'Civil Rights Defenders in the Time of Corona. As an organisation, we started making contingency plans and preparing for business continuity in late January. We are following the Public Health Agency in Sweden and WHO advice and guidance' (Civil rights defender)</p> <p>'The instructions from public authorities are being followed very strictly and life in the groups, and particularly in our communities in France, Europe, the Americas and in Africa, is organised in such a way as to respect all efforts to prevent the spread of the virus'(Emmaus International).</p>
Providing material support	Statement about or other evidence of providing material support to third parties, in relation to COVID-19 crisis	<p>IGO: '... working to establish a special fund, the Africa Coffee Facility (ACF), to assist in addressing the challenges of Africa's coffee value chain. Work on the ACF was now being refocused to take into account the response to covid-19' (International Coffee Organization)</p> <p>'We are ramping up our field program to: Provide smallholder farmers and herders with seeds, tools, livestock feed ...' (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations)</p> <p>INGO: 'During the coronavirus pandemic, Diakonia has also donated disinfectant, gloves and masks to help restrict the spread of COVID-19' (Diakonia).</p>
Running educational & awareness raising projects	Statement about or other evidence of providing awareness building program, such as webinars, online teaching, or similar projects	<p>IGO: Virtual Academy to support police learning during COVID 19 (Interpol)</p> <p>'an Online International Training Programme on "Poverty Alleviation through Micro Finance: State of Art in COVID-19 Period"' (African-Asian Rural Development Organization)</p> <p>'The Union of OIC News Agencies (UNA) concluded on Monday a virtual workshop for the staffers of</p>

(Continued)

Table A2. Continued.

Type of response	Operationalization	Examples
		news agencies, radio stations, TV channels, newspapers and electronic platforms in the Islamic world, on "Methods of vetting news during crises and spread of rumors (COVID-19)".' (Islamic Broadcasting Union)
Issuing guidelines	Statement about or other evidence of providing some professional guidelines or recommendations in relation to COVID-19 crisis	INGO: 'Many National Scout Organizations have developed programming, resources and activities to continue Scouting at Home during and after COVID-19. Check out the collection of materials that NSOs can use and adapt to engage their members'(World Organisation of the Scout Movement) IGO: 'IAEA Issues Guidelines for Nuclear Medicine Departments during COVID-19 Pandemic' (International Atomic Energy Agency) 'WCO Guidance on how to communicate during a crisis' (World Customs Organization) 'Handbook for CAAs on the management of aviation safety risks related to COVID-19' (International Civil Aviation Organization) INGO: 'We have also created COVID-19 response guidelines in Hindi and English for our teams to help them and their communities stay healthy and out of harm's way' (Pratham)
Producing knowledge	Statement about or other evidence of producing new knowledge in relation to COVID-19 crisis	IGO: 'New dashboard launched to help Commonwealth Governments tackle Coronavirus', Commonwealth COVID-19 analysis page https://www.thecommonwealth.io/Covid19analysis/ (Commonwealth Secretariat) 'CABI scientists have conducted new research highlighting the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on food security in Kenya and Uganda' (CABI) INGO: 'Deepening Resilience in Rural Communities: Results from Root Capital's Second COVID-19 Survey' (Root capital)
Sharing (third party) knowledge	Statement about or other evidence of sharing knowledge from third parties, in relation to COVID-19 crisis	IGO: sharing resources from member states and partner international organisations (https://www.icao.int/covid/Pages/Partner-Resources.aspx) (International Civil Aviation

(Continued)

Table A2. Continued.

Type of response	Operationalization	Examples
		Organization) INGO: 'Number of people confirmed to have or have had COVID-19, worldwide [map] This map gets updated multiple times each day with data by Johns Hopkins. To zoom, use the zoom buttons or hold CTRL while scrolling' (Handicap international)