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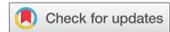
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Relationships and resources: the isomorphism of nonprofit organizations' (NPO) self-regulation

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ABSTRACT

Self-regulation emerges as an option in response to government control of the institutional environment of nonprofit organizations (NPOs). While most research focuses on conceptualizing and arguing for self-regulation, this study examines self-regulation through the lens of the institutional perspective by focusing on a specific institutional domain of NPOs in Lebanon. Results indicate that a certain degree of normative isomorphism, through professionalization, has a positive impact on NPOs' participation in self-regulation while mimetic practices do not yield the same results; coercive isomorphism is not a significant predictor. The results allude to certain implications both for management practices and for scholarly research.

KEYWORDS Self-regulation; NPOs; institutional theory; isomorphism

Introduction

The institutional environment of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) is controlled largely by government, but moderated by their status as private organizations, separate from government. Some government agencies regulate NPOs while other agencies fund or contract services out to these organizations (Laratta 2011). Nonprofits are also independent, private firms, operating in philanthropic markets. Preserving NPOs' autonomy becomes complicated, particularly as such autonomy is tied to institutional legitimacy, at times when nonprofits are increasingly called on to respond to societal needs and to avoid goal displacement (Nikolic and Koontz 2007; Verschuere and De Corte 2014). These dynamics are particularly compelling in environments where the state–NPO relationship is contested or tense, where private philanthropy is nascent and cannot substitute government funding. This is further exacerbated when problems of trust arise due to corruption or episodic scandals in the nonprofit sector, which can serve to stimulate nonprofit entrepreneurial activity (Sidel 2010) and collective action (Gugerty and Prakash 2010) around the formation of self-regulation.

One way for NPOs to preserve some autonomy, to attract or maintain resources and to garner legitimacy is to practice self-regulation, 'a set of institutions or arrangements for affecting organizational behavior' that are not typically set by a governmental apparatus but rather by the organizations seeking approval from or

seeking to demonstrate legitimacy to their surrounding environment (Bies 2010, 1062–3). While much of the current literature has focused on understanding what self-regulation means or what constitutes self-regulation, there is scant empirical testing of self-regulation and its antecedents or motivators. We try to address this gap by asking what motivates NPOs to adopt professional self-regulation associated with norms and values that are not determined primarily by a market of resources and interests (Baur and Schmitz 2012; Sidel 2010) or by government mandates or incentives (Bies 2010). This is why we look at this concept from an institutional perspective (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Being vulnerable to external influences, organizations respond to uncertainty by conforming with and increasingly becoming similar to their institutional environment (Oliver 1997). Sometimes, they favour institutional rules that are legitimated externally (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) and which promise to enhance survival prospects, stability, legitimacy and resources. Therefore, to understand nonprofit practices of self-regulation, we focus on both NPO relationships and the surrounding environment, where the norms and values are shaped and diffused.

In this study, we advance propositions derived from the institutional perspective to explain NPOs' decision to participate in self-regulatory mechanisms, at a time when existing research conceptualizes self-regulation more broadly and when empirical testing is nascent. We focus on a single institutional domain of interest and consider specific institutional dynamics within that domain by empirically examining three forms of interactions in the NPOs' surrounding environment: 1) financial relations that NPOs develop with funders, 2) formal partnerships that NPOs forge and 3) networking bodies that NPOs join. We expect that funding, partnerships and membership in networking bodies increase the probability of an NPO adopting self-regulation practices.

We draw on a data set from a specific institutional field of NPOs in Lebanon, an approach particularly appropriate for studying a particular arena of activity, 'a system of actors, actions, and relations', in its context (McAdam and Scott 2005, 10). Lebanon is an exemplary case as NPOs operate in an environment of weak government control, abundant funding sources and expanded space and needs for NPOs to operate. We attempt to verify whether NPOs' decision to self-regulate is the result of interactions with the surrounding environment and what interactions yield self-regulation. We also observe the role of funders in this self-regulation dynamic, which alternately affords greater NPO freedom and adds significant collective and individual constraints to autonomy.

The study is organized in six main sections. The following first two sections discuss self-regulation as a concept and then in application to institutional theory. Section 3 describes the research setting before the methodology is outlined in Section 4. The results are presented in Section 5. We discuss the results and draw possible implications and observations in Section 6 and conclude with possible important directions for future research.

Self-regulation: the concept and practice

In recent decades, NPOs have expanded their provision of services and goods to include services historically provided by the public sector, as well as broadened their work across an array of policy domains that span across national and international

levels. This suggests that government control over institutional environments has become paramount, as has the concern for appropriate management practices and professionalism within NPOs (Marshall and Suarez 2014). Legitimacy concerns have also arisen from this increased prominence, with resultant efforts to shore up accountability and transparency, and secure and sustain public trust and support in NPOs a well-documented phenomenon globally (Bies 2010; Ebrahim 2003a; Molnár 2008; Tremblay-Boire, Prakash, and Gugerty 2016). Self-regulation has emerged as a common strategy to address such concern (Bromley and Orchard 2016).

Self-regulation of NPOs is driven by various forces, due to differences across particular subfields, policy domains and national contexts as well as increases in the volume, role and assets held by NPOs (Bies 2010; Gugerty 2010). Additionally, confounding forces include ethical concerns and crises of public trust arising from episodic and enduring scandals within the sector and from transnational flow of finances (Molnár 2008; Prakash and Gugerty 2010); concern over the representational, political and public policy roles of NPOs locally, nationally and internationally (Ebrahim 2003a; Ebrahim 2003b); increased competition within the sector itself and with other public and private sector actors for market share (Sidel 2010) and concern that the growth of the NPO sector has outpaced the government's ability for oversight (Argandoña 2007; Sidel 2010). These numerous factors underscore why public administration scholars should look into self-regulation with increased scrutiny.

Self-regulation has also been conceptualized as a mechanism for learning across the NPO sector and within individual NPOs, serving to shape sector values and norms and facilitate the exchange of information and knowledge and, in turn, assist collaboration, facilitate relationships and augment performance (Sidel 2005); it seeks to deliver on several fronts. Self-regulation aims to signal virtue and quality of operations, mitigate malfeasance, redeem damaged reputations and renew public trust, leading to reinforced legitimacy and increased power and access to resources (Argandoña 2007; Bromely and Orchard 2016; Ebrahim 2003a; 2003b; Gugerty 2009; Prakash and Gugerty 2010; Tremblay-Boire, Prakash, and Gugerty 2016).

As important, self-regulation can be intended to stave off heavy-handed government control but operates as a complement to government concerns, potentially diminishing the need for government control (Sidel 2010). Alternatively, it is framed as serving to supplement or augment government regulation, particularly government regulatory mechanisms (Gugerty 2010; Porter and Ronit 2006). That is why we see that self-regulation can be mandatory or voluntary. In mandatory self-regulation, practices and standards are adopted by NPOs, whether collectively or by individual organizations, in response to the requirements, incentives or inducements of an external actor (e.g. donor or third party) or by force (e.g. contractual obligation). Such mandatory forms contain explicit expectations and formal mechanism to ensure enforcement of self-regulation (Bies 2010; Sidel 2010). In voluntary self-regulation, standard setting may be collective, but engagement with the standards and enforcement mechanisms is more typically self-directed, independent of, or with very limited direct external interference.

In general, self-regulation demonstrates a tendency among organizations to take the initiative rather than be forced into an action. As an institutionalized practice, self-regulation generally relies on the moral commitment of individual organizations; yet, individual NPOs may choose to participate for both self-interest and collective motivations (Gugerty 2010; Sidel 2010). A consultative and participatory approach

allows an individual NPO to have a voice in shaping the structures, processes and goals (Bies 2010; Tremblay-Boire, Prakash, and Gugerty 2016). At times, these processes span the sector itself, as in the case of standards produced by national NPO associations or federations. At times, these processes engage specific industries and subfields, sometimes within nation states or trans-nationally. This plurality of voices also results in a plurality of forms with greater and lesser degrees of uniformity and means of enforcement. We notice that self-regulation can be carried out by third parties, such as accreditation agencies or industry watchdog systems, can be developed with lesser degrees of consultative and collective voice or may operate through greater enforcement mechanisms (Bies 2010; Gugerty 2010). However, unlike imposed government regulations, strong enforcement tools are uncommon in self-regulation (Burger 2012).

Institutional pressure and new self-regulation

Oliver (1997) considers that ‘regulatory environments constrain heterogeneity’ (707). These environments prescribe uniform standards and norms and define what is acceptable or permissible and impose homogeneity within the regulated or self-regulated sector. Johnson and Prakash (2007) recognize that ‘market imperatives lead to institutional mimicry and the diffusion of best practices among [NPOs], and from governments and firms to [NPOs]’ (225). Bies (2010) relates self-regulation to ‘internal characteristics of the nonprofit sector itself, such as the institutional capacity, professional norms, and performance expectations’ (1059). This brings institutional theory into the discussion.

Faced by multiple values and conflicting demands in the institutional environment, the rational actors within the organization respond by conforming (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). ‘Individuals and organizations are assumed to be approval seeking, susceptible to social influence, and relatively intractable creatures of habit and tradition’ (Oliver 1997, 699). Conformity to norms and social expectations, functioning as institutionalized myths, is thought to ensure organizational success, legitimacy and survival (Meyer and Rowan 1977, 348). Frumkin and Galaskiewicz (2004) succinctly frame the discussion as follows: ‘Organizations do not always embrace strategies, structures, and processes that enhance their performance but, instead, react and seek ways to accommodate pressures following external scrutiny and regulation’ (285).

Congruence between the expectations of the environment and the organization takes place through the process of institutional isomorphism; one entity starts to resemble the others when faced with the same set of conditions (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Isomorphism occurs through three mechanisms. Coercive isomorphism stems from strong external influences, such as legal or economic domination, statutory requirements or contractual obligations, which may impose certain institutional arrangements on an organization. Mimetic isomorphism results from standard responses to uncertainty through replication of innovations and imitation of success of other actors. Finally, normative isomorphism is associated with professionalization, resulting from consistent interaction among organizations in a common system (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Responses to institutional pressures depend on the nature and initiators of these pressures as well as on the means and reasons why they are being exerted (Oliver

1991). NPOs might respond to self-regulation in the light of strong legal coercion and when they perceive the consequences of noncompliance too tangible or severe, evidencing coercive isomorphism at work. External funders, be they governmental or private, are also thought to drive self-regulation in nonprofits through mandates embedded in formal, contractual relationships and related performance, accountability and self-regulatory expectations (Carman 2009), but also relative to resource motivations and dependencies (Thomson 2011).

AbouAssi (2015) argues, however, that the correlation between self-regulation and dependence on an external donor can be moderated in the presence of varied expectations from external actors that is especially the case for NPOs with diverse revenue streams. A diversity of resources can affect self-regulation; NPOs with diverse sources of funding are more likely to adopt self-regulation. Resource dependence must be viewed in a nuanced way with regard to self-regulation implementation (AbouAssi 2015), contrary to the more unitary view dominating other literature, and the relative diversity of sources of funding is a vital consideration relative to its influence on nonprofit self-regulation. Yet, this is not completely inconsistent with the idea of maladaptive resource dependent responses and prior findings regarding coercive mechanisms as producing ‘false’ or only ritual compliance (Bies 2010). An NPO adopts a certain structure of practices as a result of stronger influence or dominance. Donor funding requirements and the common language they share and impose on NPOs (AbouAssi 2010) might force an NPO to adopt self-regulation through coercive isomorphism.

H1: NPOs with high resource dependence are more likely to adopt self-regulation practices through coercive isomorphism

A similar intuition on the diversity of influences also relates to the relationships among nonprofits. AbouAssi (2015) refers to the possibility that ‘practices of self-regulation could have been further motivated or incentivized through ties NPOs have’ (1269). Scholars (e.g. Gazley 2008; Zhan and Tang 2016) argue that the informal relations and ties nonprofit leaders establish with government agencies have a contingent value to their operations and functions. The leaders’ professional practices and the sector’s shared belief system and common culture and interactions in institutional arrangements encourage NPOs to voluntarily participate in self-regulatory mechanisms.

One form of these arrangements is partnerships that NPOs forge. While there are variations in its definition, partnerships are ‘working arrangements based on a mutual commitment’ (Bovaird 2004, 199). The arrangement is explicitly outlined in an agreement or a contract; it is ‘based on mutually agreed-upon objectives, pursued through a shared understanding of the most rational division of labor based on the respective comparative advantages of each partner’ (Brinkerhoff 2002, 216). We thus use partnership here to mean the formal arrangements between NPOs to implement a specific project with clear defined scope, time frame and budget. In this conception, the relationship is more oriented towards cooperation in its mutuality, in contrast to the more hierarchical dynamics noticed in a principal-agency orientation where nonprofits’ expectations and behaviours are moderated by the delegated authority given to nonprofits and through which regulatory expectations are more coercive in nature and often embedded.

As such, a partnership takes place between two or more organizations that identify and approach one another, and within a specific structure or formal arrangement—a mutually derived contract or agreed upon code of conduct—that states requirements and mechanisms (Babiak and Thibault 2009). Such an arrangement is characterized by mutually determined and agreed-on goals, specific roles and responsibilities, and the pooling of resources—tangible or intangible such as knowledge (Brinkerhoff 2002; Bovaird 2004; Chen 2010). Furthermore, partnerships require an ongoing and active communication, bringing the cultures of partnering organizations together. Working together on a joint project requires some investment in mechanisms for coordination, information management and accountability (Chen 2010, 388, Tremblay-Boire, Prakash, and Gugerty 2016).

The need to meet certain associated requirements and expectations per a written agreement triggers more organizational learning and imposes greater scrutiny, ensures compliance (DeHart-Davis, Chen, and Little 2013), and the coproduction and shared values that drive implementation self-regulation and a learning orientation (Benjamin 2008; Ebrahim 2005). Organizations need to have sufficient capacity to deal with such requirements (Graddy and Chen 2006). Therefore, we expect that partnerships among NPOs increase the probability of an NPO adopting self-regulation through normative isomorphism associated with professionalization.

H2: NPOs engaged in partnerships are more likely to adopt self-regulation practices through normative isomorphism.

There are different forms of institutional arrangements in which organizations also engage; these are the interactions through networking bodies. An organization's voluntary conformity to institutional practices is positively related to the extent these practices are diffused through the sector (Oliver 1991). Peer pressure and direct relations could motivate an organization to participate in self-regulatory systems (Bies 2010; Smith 2013). The behaviour is spurred by an organizational interest to be socially fit or acceptable (Oliver 1991).

NPOs interact in networking venues, such as conferences as well as bodies that are 'intentionally formed under the guidance of a national or international umbrella organization, which aims to link independent NPOs [and...] are self-organizing in which there is no organizing formal authority' (Ozman and Findik 2008, 4). These bodies can adopt their own self-regulation practices for internal governance (Prakash and Gugerty 2010) or act on behalf of their members to develop voluntary systems as a method for organizational learning or improvement in managerial efficacy and professionalism (Bies 2001; Bromley and Orchard 2016; Ebrahim 2005; Gugerty 2009).

In addition, networking facilitates exchange of information, experiences and resources, provides reciprocal support among organizations and facilitates the development of a common identity and a feeling of belonging that strengthens institutionalism. These forms of organizing lead to increased learning, information diffusion and capacity building (Faulk et al. 2016; Marshall and Suárez 2014) and similar memberships allow access to training and capacity building. Along the same line, Smith's (2013) study of regulatory setting in the financial markets indicates that sharing common knowledge leads to sharing of 'a level of familiarity with certain practices. Familiarity can lead to such practices being considered the norm, typical behavior, or just the way things work' (521). Nevertheless, van Raaij (2006) argues

that these organizing bodies are active and develop legitimacy only if their members are actively involved in their inception.

In these networking venues, NPOs then get exposed to other experiences and best practices and learn from each other. We expect that membership in networking bodies or being part of umbrella organizations increases the probability of an NPO adopting self-regulation through mimetic isomorphism. Self-regulation is the result of being exposed to other best practices and of imitation and replication of innovations.

H3: NPOs engaged in networking bodies are more likely to adopt self-regulation practices through mimetic isomorphism.

In sum, this article tests the applicability of the institutional perspective on NPOs' application of some form of self-regulation. It verifies whether coercive, mimetic or normative isomorphism, through seeking resources, forging partnerships and engaging in networking bodies, reflects an increased likelihood of adopting self-regulation by an NPO. It does so in the context of a research setting where the diversity of factors associated with isomorphism is at play simultaneously.

Research setting

This article centers on a single institutional field of NPOs that of environmental NPOs in Lebanon. In this sense, institutional field connotes 'a set of organizations that constitute a recognized area of life, are characterized by structured network relations, and share a set of institutions' (Lawrence and Phillips 2004, 691), sometimes conceived of as industries or sub-industries (McAdam and Scott 2005) or as sets of organizations or communities that are closely associated (Greenwood, Suddaby, and Hinings 2002). By pursuing study at the single sub-industry level, the environmental subfield, we focus on a distinct setting in which institutional characteristics and the diversity of factors relative to isomorphism are at play.

Lebanon provides an important context for this study, presenting useful lessons for NPO self-regulation in other developing countries, particularly those in the midst of ongoing political and economic turbulence and change. The fact that Lebanon exhibits an active NPO sector, in the midst of a weak economy, struggling democracy and challenging enabling environment is particularly noteworthy. In terms of its economy, Lebanon relies largely on revenue sources external to it, including funds from treasury bonds, foreign assistance (loans, grants) and remittances. Yet, Lebanon has a large number of civil society organization, with some estimates as high as 15,000 organizations for a population of around 4 million (AbouAssi 2015).

Further, we contribute to the literature by extending earlier work on self-regulation by focusing on a single institutional domain of interest, that of environmental NPOs, at a time when existing research conceptualizes self-regulation more broadly. Our contribution is further in considering specific institutional dynamics within that domain by empirically examining interactions in the NPOs' surrounding environment—those of financial and relational significance.

The NPO sector in Lebanon is particularly dynamic; Lebanese NPOs are regulated by the 1908 Law and its amendments (AbouAssi 2015; Kingston 2001). NPOs enjoy

relatively more autonomy than their counterparts in the region. While other countries impose severe conditions for forming an organization, Lebanon adopts a liberal approach that only requires notifying the appropriate government agency once an organization is created (El Daif 2014).

Besides an outdated law, there is some evidence of capricious use and uneven implementation of the law due political or bureaucratic factors and reasons (AbouAssi 2015; Baroud 2004; El Daif 2014). This legal environment impinges upon NPO self-regulation. Government–NPO relationships reflect limited interaction, considerable distrust and lack of collaboration (AbouAssi 2015).

As mentioned before, government can control NPOs' institutional environment through funding. Here, we notice that Lebanese NPOs function with few constraints on how they may be funded (AbouAssi 2013); they have 'access to a wide variety of resources. No limitations hinder access to foreign funding. Nevertheless, most organizations are dependent on these funds' (El Daif 2014, 21). On average, revenue estimates indicate that approximately one-fourth of NPOs revenues come directly from international donors, including foreign governments and private organizations (AbouAssi 2013).

This ability to secure funding from various sources with limited governmental interference or control raises the prospects for self-regulation. First, there are claims of clientelism and corruption in dispersing of funds and in implementing projects (El Daif 2014; Kingston 2001); hence, there is a need to ameliorate widespread negative perceptions and restore public trust and legitimacy. Second, the national government's weak control is substituted by an exacerbated foreign dependence (AbouAssi 2015; Helo 2004). AbouAssi (2013) elaborates on how some environmental NPOs engage in activities that are disconnected from their missions to pursue donor funding. But as the literature suggests, dependence on foreign funders can have some perverse effects. There is a certain common language that the two sides share (AbouAssi 2010), and there might be some push for partnership and networking among NPOs. As such the role of foreign donors in shaping NPO professional norms, and relatedly NPO self-regulation expectations, is elevated.

The Lebanese resource context also has a unique citizen dimension, not consistently seen as a common characteristic in service organizations in Western settings, but somewhat more consistent to the common values of other collectives in other national settings (Tschirhart and Gazley 2014). Lebanese NPOs are dues-paying membership organizations. Any member of the public expressing an interest or belief in the mission is allowed to join and be part of the organization; however, these organizations have public missions and work to serve the general public (Baroud 2004; Helou 2004). Being membership organizations, membership fees are one of the primary sources of revenue, with a wide variation of contribution in comparison with foreign funding.

Lebanese NPOs face capacity constraints and management challenges (Baroud 2004; UNDP 2009); this is especially evident in the environmental organizations reported on in this research. First, these organizations are relatively young, with more than a third founded after 2000. This is particularly true of environmental NPOs, which were stimulated by an influx of foreign funding and increased opportunities for collaboration with international NPOs working in the environmental space in the past 20 years (AbouAssi 2015). Second, human resource and annual revenue are markedly small. This also holds true in the sample of environmental

NPOs under examination in this study; the average number of paid staff in the sample is five with many relying on volunteers. Many organizations operate with an average size annual budget of around \$40,000.

A stifling factor in the general NPO environment in Lebanon is that communication and networking among NPOs is weak (UNDP 2009). Domestic networking bodies exist but their membership is relatively small, and largely ineffective; Lebanese NPOs tend to join regional and international networking bodies where they can get access to information, best practice and resources (AbouAssi 2015). While environmental NPOs do engage with international NPO networks, an additional inhibiting factor for NPO collaboration results from widespread rumours of corruption in the sector, making NPOs somewhat cautious about reputational effects and collaboration (AbouAssi 2015; UNDP 2009).

From this environment emerges several factors for NPO concern for accountability and self-regulation: an inadequate regulatory environment to stimulate private philanthropy or revenue diversification; generalized concern around corruption; engagement by citizens as members of NPOs; and the diffusion of ideas from international partnerships and donor demands (UNDP 2009). Prior research has documented that Lebanese NPOs recognize a need for ethical self-regulation practices (AbouAssi 2015; Baroud 2004; Kingston 2001). Further, some Lebanese environmental organizations have led efforts to develop and promote a common code of ethics sector-wide. Other NPOs adopt certain best practices and international standards based on their exposure, with few implementing formal auditing and performance evaluations.

In sum, in this article, we target environmental NPOs in Lebanon as the general population, in order to control for the variable of sub-sector. This serves the purpose of testing the institutional perspective which focuses on how organizations in a certain population tend to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions, including the sub-sector or field of work (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). It is important to note that while there is a large and critical literature on sectarian influences and the role of political elites as influencing the NPO sector, and CSOs in particular (Clark and Salloukh 2013), there is also some evidence that the subject of environmentalism is somewhat depoliticizing (Nagel and Staeheli 2015), particularly in comparison with other social and human rights arenas. Though these dimensions and other social and political factors in a profoundly complex society such as Lebanon undoubtedly mediate NPO life, they also reinforce the decision to focus on a single sphere of NPO activity. Table 1 provides a general profile of the environmental NPO sector in Lebanon.

Table 1. General features of the sample.

Feature	Statistics
Founded after 2000	37%
Average size of executive committee	Eight members
Appointment/No elections of executive committee	7.1%
Average number of paid staff	8
NGOs with volunteers	91.8%
Some form of cooperation with other NGOs	79.2%
Some form of cooperation with the government	72.8%
Membership in networking or umbrella bodies ³	69.63%
Annual budget of less than \$50,000	63%
Publication of annual reports	77%

Methodology

Data collection and analysis

Out of around 5,000 formally registered NPOs¹ in Lebanon, there are 153 environmental organizations. These are the organizations that provide a ‘public notice’ (*ilm wa khabar*) and submit annual reports and budgets to the Ministry of Interior, according to the 1908 Law and its amendments. All 153 environmental NPOs were included in our survey, which was carried out through an online and mail questionnaire during 2010–2011. With 98 organizations responding to the survey, the response rate was 64 percent. We then collected secondary data through the review of the organizations’ annual reports and websites to verify and supplement the data. However, nine observations were dropped due to missing information.

The data gathered through the survey and archival research centred on NPOs’ operational and financial resources and self-regulation practices. The operational and financial resources section of the survey included questions relative to the annual budget, amount and proportion of internal sources of revenue (membership fees and income-generating projects) and external sources of revenue, and staffing. The respondents were asked to identify the self-regulation forms their organizations adopt, a listing of which was derived from prior empirical studies (Sidel 2010); the list includes: adherence to a code of ethics/conduct, accreditation and certification, performance evaluation mechanisms, accountability and disciplinary mechanisms, formal standards, auditing or benchmarking. Observations during fieldwork reveal some similarity between the content areas of self-regulation at play in Lebanon and elsewhere globally, such as governance, financial management, management practices and transparency/public reporting (Bothwell 2001; Prakash and Gugerty 2010; Sloan 2009), as well as some areas particular to performance aspects of the environmental subfield. Though the isomorphism and diffusion of content are certainly relevant and worthy of further study, in the present study, we concern ourselves primarily with the application of self-regulation. Table 2 lists the forms of self-regulation measured in this study.

The statistical model

To test the hypotheses, the statistical model includes the application of self-regulation as the dependent variable. This is defined as a binary variable as to whether an organization adheres to, or participates in, any of the forms of self-regulation. It is assigned the value of 1 if an organization participates in any

Table 2. Forms of self-regulation practiced by the surveyed NGOs.

Form of Self-regulation	Percentages of NGOs practicing
A code of ethics/conduct	98.40%
Accreditation and Certification	3.17%
Performance evaluation mechanisms	26.98%
Accountability and disciplinary mechanisms	1.58%
Formal standards	11.11%
Benchmarking	4.76%
Other self-regulation mechanism (auditing and reporting)	33.33%

forms of self-regulation and is assigned the value of 0 if an organization does not involve in any form of self-regulation activity. This makes logistic regression an appropriate method to use.²

The analysis assumes that organizations are inclined to adopt self-regulation practices to proactively comply with the institutional environment (Bies 2010). Relative to our hypotheses, we are assessing the impact of coercive, normative and mimetic isomorphism on self-regulation practices, with:

- The number of memberships each NPO holds is a continuous variable that we use in the model to reflect mimetic isomorphism as NPOs join various networking or umbrella organizations.
- The number of partnerships each NPO has is a continuous variable that we use in the model to reflect normative isomorphism as a result of practices NPOs adopt to forge partnerships.
- Resource dependence, as measured through the percentage of reported revenues an NPO acquires from external sources compared to internal revenues, reflects coercive isomorphism as the reliance on external revenues might be linked to mandated requirements.

The model also includes several control variables:

- (1) Organizational age is defined as a continuous variable and measured as the natural log of the difference between 2010 and the year of establishment of the organization (Guo and Acar 2005).
- (2) Organizational size is a continuous variable, measured by an NPO's number of staff in 2010.
- (3) The scope of work is a categorical variable (national, regional or local) based on the geographical operation of an NPO.
- (4) Education is a continuous variable measured by the definite numbers of senior staff with master's degrees.
- (5) The number of volunteers is a continuous variable measured by the definite numbers of volunteers.

We first do data description, then adopt logistic regression to examine how each independent variable helps to predict the expected probability of whether an organization practice self-regulation. Table 3 provides the means and standard deviations of all the continuous variables in our sample.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations of variables.

Variable	Observation	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Partnerships	89	1.012	1.705	0.000	8.000
Memberships	89	2.058	3.023	0.000	14.000
Age	89	2.651	0.787	0.000	3.738
Resources	89	0.795	0.339	0.000	1.000
Staff	89	4.198	4.622	0.000	20.000
Volunteers	89	24.744	72.782	0.000	520.000
Staff Education	89	1.430	1.670	0.000	7.000

Results and discussion

We first conducted a correlation analysis to examine any possible correlations between predictor variables (Gujarati and Porter 2009). As Table 4 depicts, no unusually high correlations have been reported—especially between the independent variables—except for the expected correlation between the two control variables, staff and staff education.

We used four models in the logistic regression analysis. The results of the four logistic regression models are displayed in Table 5. Model 1 represents the full model that includes resources, partnerships and memberships as independent variables and other predictor variables as control variables. Models 2–4 are reduced models, nested within Model 1. Each of the two models contains only one predictor variable as an independent variable with the same control variables of the full model. Since Models 2–4 are nested under Model 1, we used log likelihood ratio test to contrast the fit of nested logistic regressions.

Model 1 includes resources, partnerships and memberships as independent variables; age, staff education, volunteers and scope are listed as control variables. This full model shows that both memberships and resources are not significant based upon the individual t-statistics; this means we are unable to claim support for Hypotheses 1 and 3. However, when we exclude partnerships and memberships in Model 2 and only include resources as independent variable with the same control variables ($\chi^2_{Diff} = 15.89$, with degrees of freedom equal to 2), we notice some change in the results. Holding everything else constant, resource dependence has a negative effect on the likelihood to adopt self-regulation practices; the more dependent an organization is, the less likely it will adopt such practices. Although this effect is marginally significant, it contradicts Hypothesis 1. Yet, the results indicate that partnerships, memberships or the combination of the two are significant to this model and therefore cannot be excluded.

Model 3 excludes memberships and resources and only enlists partnerships as independent variables with the same control variables as included in Model 1. The addition of variables (Memberships and Resources) does not improve the model ($\chi^2_{Diff} = 2.55$, with degrees of freedom equal to 2). In contrast to Model 1, Model 4 excluded partnerships and resources and only contains memberships as independent variables ($\chi^2_{Diff} = 16.89$, with degrees of freedom equal to 2). This result shows either partnerships or resources or both of them are significant to the model and therefore cannot be excluded. Accordingly, we focus on Model 3 to discuss the results of the hypothesis testing and relevant findings since it has the highest overall fit.

Table 4. Correlation matrix.

	Partnerships	Memberships	Ext. Revenues	Age	Staff	Volunteers	Staff Education
Partnerships	1.000						
Memberships	.450	1.000					
Ext. revenues	-.043	-.092	1.000				
Age	-.187	-.089	.046	1.000			
Staff	.022	-.040	.483	-.087	1.000		
Volunteers	-.024	-.098	.173	-.165	.547	1.000	
Staff education	-.039	-.084	.458	-.188	.778	.480	1.000

Table 5. Results of logistic regression models.

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
		B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
Self-regulation	Constant	-1.53 (1.41)	.42 (1.08)	-2.66** (1.29)	-.99 (1.02)
	Ext. revenues	-1.80 (1.18)	-2.08* (1.11)		
	Partnerships	1.22** (.49)		1.23*** (.47)	
	Memberships	-.058 (.11)			.12 (.10)
Control variables	Age	1.37*** (.44)	1.07*** (.40)	1.20*** (.42)	.88** (.36)
	Staff	.12 (.11)	.11 (.10)	.08 (.10)	.06 (.10)
	Staff education	.002 (.27)	-.13 (.25)	-.046 (.27)	-.157 (.25)
	Volunteers	-.007 (.006)	-.005 (.004)	-.006 (.006)	-.003 (.004)
	Scope 2	-1.00 (.88)	-1.60** (.81)	-.69 (.82)	-1.15 (.77)
	Scope 3	-.98 (.82)	-1.24 (.77)	-.63 (.79)	-.69 (.73)
	Log likelihood	-37.5322	-44.097	-38.9365	-45.3865

* $p < .1$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$

The coefficients in Model 3 indicate the effects of partnerships as a significant predictor variable to predict the expected probability of an organization practicing self-regulation. A positive and significant logistic coefficient means that controlling for other variables in the model, partnerships turn out to have a positive and significant coefficient estimate of 1.23 (with a $p < 001$), supporting Hypothesis 2. Using the odds ratio, for every additional partnership an NPO forges, the odds of adopting self-regulation increase by a factor of 3.42. The only other positive and significant effect is that of age.

Self-regulation: coercive, normative or mimetic isomorphism?

Our goal in this study was to examine the impact of institutional isomorphism on the adoption of self-regulation practices by a subset of Lebanese NPOs. We took the dependence on external funding as an indicator of coercive isomorphism which Scholars (Bies 2010; Thomson 2011) often associate with the market dynamics: donor funding and government pressure. There is a general inclination to exacerbate the impact of dependence on funding or on the government on organizational behaviour, including the tendency to adopt some self-regulation practices, as this dependency is associated with organizational reputation and public trust and legitimacy (Gazley 2008; Laratta 2011). However, our results underplay this coercive response, aligning with previous work (AbouAssi 2015) that underplays the impact of dependencies on self-regulation practices.

In other words, the level of resource dependence itself does not necessarily correlate with tendencies to self-regulate; and when such correlation takes place, it is marginally significant. The challenge is not how to define or measure dependency.

Reliance on external versus internal revenues or the presence of a major donor versus diverse smaller donors could be mitigated by the agency or ability of an organization to buffer donor pressures and demands through the gradual absorption of or playing off these demands against each other (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). The challenge rather lies in the focus on transaction content and the substance of the dependencies (i.e. resources) (Streeter and Gillespie 1993). We should take into account the requirements associated with these dependencies as well as the relations that go beyond these dependencies. It is then that we can interpret the result of more dependency or coercion being associated with less application of self-regulation practices; these dependencies could possibly lead to building trust and enhancing legitimacy between an NPO and its donors, waning the interest or motive to self-regulate. As such, self-regulation practices are not necessarily a response to a specific dependency or funding requirement, as much as they are related to opportunities to engage and build better and mutually beneficial relations (AbouAssi 2015; Johnson and Prakash 2007; Tremblay-Boire, Prakash, and Gugerty 2016; Zhan and Tang 2016).

Moving to normative isomorphism, forging partnerships increases the likelihood of applying some form of self-regulation practices, as hypothesized. This result is better understood in the light of the challenges of partnerships and the opportunities of self-regulation. Partnership structures incorporate and often make explicit—through practice, policy or formal agreement—certain governance mechanism, moral and material incentives, clearly defined goals with performance indicators and defined roles, and expectations for transparency and accountability (Brinkerhoff 2002; Chen 2010; Lister 1999; Molnár 2008; Tremblay-Boire, Prakash, and Gugerty 2016). The close and ongoing interactions between partners means direct and close monitoring of behaviour to ensure that an organization remains consistent, committed, accountable and responsive to its mission, core values and constituencies (Chen 2010). Reciprocal accountability starts to take place when each partner assumes responsibility and is accountable to the others for its actions and its potential impact on the partnership (Brinkerhoff 2002). Thus, partnerships create and reinforce a culture of self-regulation based on values and reinforced through the consistent interaction among organizations in this common system (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Further, organizations are actively involved in the inception of partnerships, making them more rewarding and effective (van Raaij 2006). Leaders in such partnerships must understand the potential structural and strategic challenges as they negotiate with other organizations to develop partnerships in order to effectively achieve the objectives of the relationships (Chen 2010). There is a need to negotiate and reinforce agreed principles and processes of working together in a framework where decisions of partners mutually influence each other (Bovaird 2004). To adhere to valued and agreed-on standards, NPOs attempt to invest in enhanced performance that will reflect on the quality and effectiveness of outcomes (services or production), including self-regulation practices. The standards and norms expected of partners also filter out unproductive, low-performers, 'outliers' and free-riders and are thought to affect the general performance of the entire sector. The exchange of information and experience sharing between partners will lead to a better coordination of efforts

and utilization of resources while reducing duplicated work and activities (Jordan 2005; Sidel 2010).

Finally, partnerships are usually defined by mutuality, which includes understanding of clearly defined goals and organizational identity, which helps organizations find similar partners (Brinkerhoff 2002). Standards and norms serve as guidelines for NPOs' work within the partnership; NPOs have moral obligation to ensure they are responsible for their behaviours and responsive to their partners (Jordan 2005). Another practical reason is that partnerships also require a continuous assessment to ensure understanding and compliance with requisite and success factors, create new knowledge through dialogue and feedback, and refine partnership's contribution to performance. Thus, partnerships can be learning-based approaches (Bovaird 2004; Brinkerhoff 2002).

In terms of processes of mimetic isomorphism, we expected that membership in networking bodies helps organizations learn about and then develop and apply self-regulation through replication of innovations and imitation of success of other organizations they interact with and learn from. Such networking bodies are channels for the flow of information between organizations, reducing misunderstanding and encouraging collaboration. Personal meetings and information complementarity are large influences towards the development and formation of arrangements, characterized by low intensity and high autonomy among NPOs (Ozman and Findik 2008; Zhan and Tang 2016). A possible opportunity, and a prominent logic of self-regulation, would be for the sector to collectively shape an agreed upon shared identity (Sidel 2010). Self-regulation becomes a learning exercise for the participants and happens through a process of mimetic isomorphism through familiarity and imitation or emulation (Smith 2013). Our results, however, do not provide any support for this hypothesis.

A possible explanation is the lack of enough or robust collaboration among the Lebanese NPOs. Ozman and Findik's (2008) study on women's NPOs in Turkey exhibits similar results. Members of organizations know each other from conferences, seminars, training sessions and meetings; such acquaintances can lead to organizations gaining more information through communication and new technology. Nevertheless, relationships and information-sharing among member organizations do not necessarily translate equally into a collaborative environment (Gazley 2008). Lack of trust, weak institutions, limited transparency and ideological differences continue to be barriers in the relationships. While NPOs could engage with networks, more organization and formalization is required to sustain collective actions and collaborations (Ozman and Findik 2008; Prakash and Gugerty 2010). These results also echo van Raaij's (2006) conclusion that these collaborative relations are less likely to be rewarding and effective when members are not actively involved in their inception.

To add, membership in networking bodies does not necessarily form a dense network of interaction. The results herein also align with the conclusions of Marshall and Suárez (2014) that such networks are much more influential for International NPOs and not necessarily for local NPOs. The fact that many of the surveyed NPOs in our study are members of international networking bodies, but local NPOs themselves means that the interaction in these bodies is not necessarily as frequent or ongoing. Although the organizations are indeed exposed to other cultures and norms and have easy access to knowledge and best practices, the exchanges are not extended, intensified or entrenched. The impact of these institutional networking

arrangements is then moderated by other factors including diverse organizational culture and identity as well as distinct social environment.

Self-regulation and adoption of accountability mechanisms may also be driven by NPO responsiveness to funders, beneficiaries and their peers (Prakash and Gugerty 2010; Tremblay-Boire, Prakash, and Gugerty 2016); this responsiveness is theorized as being self-motivated and voluntary rather than mandated by external parties as a path towards resources. Relatedly power structures can emerge within partnerships, partly around resource motivations and control over resources (Lister 1999). One form of power is the structural influence by one side on the institutional and organizational characteristics of the other (Lister 1999). As such, self-regulation 'may be viewed as an attempt to reduce the abusive potential' (Ebrahim 2003a, 824) or be an adaptive response rather than a coercive response.

Similarly, other scholarship suggests that commitment to organizational values and entrenchment in institutional arrangements influence organizational decisions more than resource dependence (Frumkin and Galaskiewicz 2004); an organization then tends to repeat its actions or behaviours, especially if these actions are rewarding. This suggestion resonates here; the increased practices of various forms of self-regulation are reified through partnerships and over time become contingent on organizational values and institutional arrangements that are rewarding to NPOs, and on the proclivity in NPO leadership to recognize these rewards.

Reflections and conclusion

The nature of NPOs' relationship with other actors and the dual role they play in the relationship complicates the sector's self-regulation. NPOs serve as agents of external authorities at many levels through such activities as contracting and formal funding agreements. They might therefore depend on these authorities, even to control their behaviour. In self-regulation, NPOs can switch hats to 'act as principals in shaping standards for the sector as a whole' (Ebrahim 2003b, 202). Consequently, institutional variables become more prominent than resource variables. After all, self-regulatory systems are signalling mechanisms (Gugerty 2009); adopting multiple forms of self-regulation, the organization might be trying to send multiple signals to multiple audiences or that it needs these signals since some are weak and will not give it the legitimacy it seeks.

The results indicate that a mimetic approach to self-regulation based on the best practices replication around the world might not be effective, echoing the same conclusion Sidel (2005) reaches in his study of the Credibility Alliance initiative in India. Unless linked to more mechanisms with some teeth, self-regulation would be light-handed with less effective and more vulnerable results. We are not necessarily calling for more coercive implementation of self-regulation that is linked to strict tax-exemption status or government incentive. The results herein and AbouAssi's (2015) study provide evidence that resource dependence might not be a main motivator for self-regulation, particularly in certain cultural or industry contexts. Sidel's (2005) call for associational entrepreneurship in self-regulation which allows for experimentation with various forms of incentives to ensure stronger compliance with standards and norms is, however, worth further examination.

Further, better understanding of the levers or drivers and reinforcing practices for self-regulation within partnerships is necessary. Network memberships do not yield

mimetic practices that result in self-regulation; resource dependence is negative coercive response, while partnerships have a normative effect. The key issue is that the less voluntary lever has to be based on some kind of mutuality and requires a greater hold. Recognizing the limitation of the sample size, the data and the fact that self-regulatory systems are not alike—in terms of cost and purposes, we postulate that a self-regulation practice is both voluntary and, yet, viewed as mutual and essential; the extent and the nexus of both are at play. Thus, structural and values-driven dynamics warrant further research; this is especially important as existing research points to structural and value-based differences in internal practices of governance and accountability (AbouAssi and An 2017; Molnár 2008).

This leads us to food for thought. We need to realize that the motivation to engage in self-regulations is as important as the process of engagement and might be mediated or premised by the process. Chen (2010) rightfully brings the two together to assess the outcomes of inter-organizational relations, and van Raaij (2006) tirelessly underscores that it is the active involvement in the process of forging relationship that ensures the desired results. More specifically, DeHart-Davis, Chen, and Little (2013) highlight the importance of the process of designing formal and written rules compared to unwritten ones that might be assumed to be the practice with voluntary self-regulation. The process of formalizing certain rules promises organizational attention and better legitimacy, and higher acceptance and compliance.

We invite future research to discern the specific forms of self-regulation (e.g. collective or individual, sophisticated or basic), and to examine the motivation for and the involvement in the process of developing these practices. As important is to consider the quality, enforceability and impact of each form of self-regulation. Further, future research should examine the nature of the content variation in the self-regulation practice, as both a force and result of isomorphism. Marshall and Suarez (2014) provide analogue for pursuing this question, as they studied the diffusion and adoption of management practices in international and humanitarian NGOs both in terms of study design and framing research questions. In addition, future research should ruminate on expanding our theoretical approaches to self-regulation to diverse NPO industries and fields of activity and institutional settings. In this study, we focused on a nonprofit subfield in a national context where the phenomenon of self-regulation and institutionalism is nascent. Self-regulation regimes are premised on the normative notion that nascent sectors need self-regulation to institutionalize and grow. Such regimes are not abating, and this study sheds some light onto the role of relationships in such regimes.

Notes

1. Reports indicate that approximately 700 of these organizations are active on regular basis (UNDP 2009).
2. We also used an additive index of these practices, which resulted in a scale of 0 to 7. This variable is problematic because no weights were assigned to the individual forms of accountability, largely because it is difficult to assign the relative importance, expense or risk associated with each practice given the diversity of organizational situations and current literature provides little clarity on such weighting. Further, the results are fairly skewed with a majority of respondents clustered towards the lower end of the scale. Nevertheless, we ran both OLS and Poisson's (the logic being that the adoption of self-regulation was a repeated activity even when the practices were different) regression analyses and found similar results, both in direction and

in relative weight of the coefficients. This reinforces the logistic regression results reported on herein.

3. Forty-one bodies in total, primarily of an international nature.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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