

# Institutional Voids and the Role of NGOs in Filling Voids: The Case of GIMDES



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**Abstract** Recently, institutional voids have been analyzed in many researches. The aim of this study is to determine how institutional voids can be discerned and through which tools and strategies can be filled. Current study depends on a case analysis as a qualitative research method, and in this context, GIMDES as an NGO is addressed. Finally, discerning an institutional void and filling this void are determined step-by-step. Further, the strategies and tools in filling the void(s) are also determined through gathered data.

**Keywords** Institutional voids • NGOs • GIMDES • Halal product certification

## 1 Introduction

This study focuses on investigating “why and how an institutional void was filled by a non-governmental organization (NGO) contrary to the established thought in the literature that voids can just be filled through the attempts of the state (Fligstein 1990; Hooks 1990) or business groups (Mair and Marti 2009; Vermeulen et al. 2007).”

The effects of institutions on the fields have been researched to a great extent by economists (e.g., North 1990), sociologists (e.g., Beckert 2002), and organizational theory scholars (e.g., DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Additionally, it is also seen that the subject is discussed by international business management scholars in several studies (e.g., Khanna and Palepu 1997, 2010) contributed to

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the literature with respect to the institutional void conception in terms of IBM. Moreover, organizational theory scholars, recently, also attempt to respond to this movement particularly in the context of “institutional entrepreneurship” framework. Institutional void, as an emerging concept, is defined as “non-existence or weakness of institutional framework that regulates the industry” by Mair and Marti (2009), and through referring to the study of Rao et al. (2000), it is explained as “fields of opportunity that raise desire on the side of entrepreneurs to add new norms, values and beliefs in social structures” (Karatas-Ozkan et al. 2014). The concept can also be addressed as a problem that businesses from developing countries confront with when they try to internationalize, and since mentioned, countries lack necessary institutions that can support main activities of the businesses (Khanna and Palepu 1997).

The study is about why and how an NGO filled an institutional void in an industry. Particular characteristics of this study with regard to institutional void can be stated as it stresses the roles of NGOs to fill the institutional voids. Many of the studies in the literature limelight the role of state, its agencies, and, further, business groups in structuration process of fields and filling institutional voids. In current study, the emergence of GIMDES’s halal product and certification activities as a requirement for Turkish businesses tried to internationalize, the perception of this requirement, and the development and formation of halal fields in Turkey are addressed from a historical perspective through analyzing archive documents and a few interviews. Several remarkable results obtained from this study are as follows: GIMDES firstly started its operations in 2005 in Turkey, and in this scope, GIMDES joined in the WHC (World Halal Council), which is an international umbrella organization for halal, when it was invited to a meeting of the WHC in Thailand in 2008, and finally, GIMDES certificated products as halal for export since 2009 (GIMDES 2011). After that, GIMDES attempted to fill the voids about lack of halal certification in this field by translation texts related to existing halal products and their certifications through undertaking an agency role in the development process of halal field. Then, GIMDES was supported by several organizations in various countries which have already possessed institutionalized rules, norms and arrangements on halal certification and has been gained legitimacy through the acknowledgment as an organization in this field by an international umbrella organization (WHC). Finally, GIMDES became one of the leading organizations during the development of the field (halal certification) and implemented several strategies to keep its place. Finally, the authors consider that the study will contribute to the literature—particularly with respect to organizational theory—from the perspective of the role of NGOs in filling institutional voids, their rationales, and strategies to act in this way.

## 2 Theoretical Background in the Scope of Institutional Void, Agency and Institutional Entrepreneurship

Markets are seen as private social structures and important mechanisms of exchange. To exist and function, they require specific institutions and rules (Mair and Marti 2009). However, these institutions and rules sometimes do not exist, or they become insufficient during time. Situations like this more often and significantly exist in the developing markets. Khanna and Palepu (2010) put forward common problems of developing markets as weak intellectual property rights, high state bureaucracy and corruption, together with low-quality products, customer disloyalty, and difficulty of employing talented workforce. Campbell and Lindberg (1990) and Dobbin and Dowd (1997) point out that the state takes the most important role by forcing institutional actors and through its policies in shaping markets. Scott (1995), at that point, defines institutions as cognitive, normative, and regulatory structures that provide stability and meaning to the societal behavior. With these tools in hand, it can be claimed that the state provides basic institutional arrangements such as property rights, trade rules, and competition through its regulative power for stabilizing and arranging fields towards creating a healthy economic environment. Institutional voids appear when the state does not pioneer to the formation of institutional arrangements. Khanna and Palepu (2000) define institutional void as nonexistence or weakness of institutional regulations that support the markets and the state of failing to meet the desired performance. This appears particularly in the markets where infrastructure for capital, labor, and product markets has not developed yet. It is the insufficiency of institutional regulations that should support basic business operations and impeding the functioning of the market (Khanna and Palepu 1997, 2000). These voids that are caused by insufficiency or lack of necessary regulations can be filled by actors such as individual actors (Yang 2004) or NGOs (Mair and Marti 2009) as we know that from literature.

In this regard, if it has to be explained more technically, it can be claimed that voids are filled or at least attempted by institutional agencies which are also called as institutional entrepreneurs (cf. DiMaggio, 1988). In line with this, Scott (2008) states that individual or organizational agencies might emerge in virtue of diversity and complexity and in some particular cases in conflicting and unpredictable situations. DiMaggio (1988) puts forward that agency can be discussed in a more centric place from its institutional dimension, and he moves from this idea further to the establishment of institutions and stresses that capable actors with sufficient resources will diversify into “institutional entrepreneur” who will pursue opportunities to which he or she gives utmost importance. Lawrence et al. (2011), at that point, links institutional change and innovation to works that are related to deinstitutionalization. Then the authors expand their study to the creation, maintenance, and disruption of institutions which they refer to as “institutional work.” Battilana et al. (2009) discusses emergence of institutional entrepreneurship which gave more emphasis to the roles of actor and agency in institutional change. From this point of

view, with respect to the creation of institutions, it can be stated that institutional entrepreneurship is equipped with necessary resources as conceptualized by DiMaggio (1988); individual and organizational actors have a central position, and they can attempt to do activities toward filling the institutional voids that they determine particularly in the creation, maintenance, and disruption of institutions (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006; Lawrence et al., 2011). Therefore, filling institutional voids is an activity realized by individual and/or organizational entrepreneurs who take action with a specific purpose as agencies.

### **3 Agency in Terms of Filling Institutional Voids and NGOs as an Agency**

DiMaggio (1988) asserts that institutional entrepreneurs with sufficient resources are required for the creation and transformation of institutions. However, Fligstein (2001) argues that actors with no resources are surrounded mostly by institutions, but in some certain cases, they can also create new institutions by using existing regulations in unexpected ways. In fact, Colomy (1998) states that while entrepreneurs with scant resources have definite weaknesses, they can also become efficient agencies of change. Therefore, it can be said that in the creation of institutions, not only the resources that actors possess but also there can be some other dynamics which trigger purposive action of actors. In their study where they investigate institutional entrepreneurship in detail, Battilana et al. (2009) put forward conditions that they categorized under two main titles as “social position of the actor” and “characteristics of the field” which, they think, are effective in the operations of institutional entrepreneurs. Furthermore, another characteristic of agencies, about this, is their “awareness” that constitutes the basic notion to change their existing institutions (Battilana et al. 2009; Greenwood and Suddaby 2006). Thus, it can be stated that change agencies have to be aware about the requirements and rationales of change before they start an institutional change project particularly when it is about filling institutional voids.

Although NGOs are not mostly emphasized as agencies in the studies about filling institutional voids, several studies (e.g., Mair and Marti 2009) show how NGOs created several platforms and filled institutional voids through bricolage. In addition, Child et al. (2007) put forward that the awareness about the development of environmental protection systems caused active participation of international and national NGOs among other organizations. It is because it can be stated that compared to other organizations, NGOs are more capable of understanding organizations at local- and national-level institutions (Webb et al. 2010). These cases are significant, since they demonstrate two of the main rationales, that NGOs depend upon, which are “filling in the voids in political systems” and “responding to ineffective or corrupted bureaucracy” (Vachani et al. 2009). On the other hand, high level of local knowledge NGOs possess, their embeddedness in multilevel informal networks, and their ability to establish relationship with different

stakeholder groups (Webb et al. 2010) require them to come fore in filling institutional voids as active agencies in a modern society. In fact, NGOs are basically founded to fill the voids that occur due to inefficiency of state and private sector organizations in meeting civic and consumer demands (Teegen et al. 2004).

## 4 Methodology

This study discusses how an institutional void is filled by a nongovernmental organization (NGO) and which strategies are followed and tools used in filling them. To put more clearly, it is about why and how an NGO filled an institutional void in an industry. It is based on a case study about GIMDES (Food and Consumer Products Inspection and Certification Research Association). In an analysis of the case, scant in-depth interviews were realized to collect primary data, and archival/ documents were reviewed to gather secondary data.

In order to collect data, 5-hour face-to-face interviews were conducted with the one executive and two staff of GIMDES. During the interview process, an interview form consisting of semi-structured questions was used in the direction of previous studies in the literature. In this scope, interviews were held on January 2014 in the headquarters of the GIMDES in Istanbul. Moreover, although we had time constraints, we could catch opportunity for limited observations of the activities of GIMDES in the headquarters during the visit.

In order to find answers to the research question, interviews were conducted with two staff and one executive of GIMDES by the first author. Some information about interviews are presented in Table 1.

Collected data from these sources coded line by line (Charmaz, 2006) for creating categories which can be strongly related to GIMDES’s strategies and tools used in the filling institutional voids, and presented in the findings section of the study. These data provide information about how GIMDES operated to fill in the voids, the strategies taken by GIMDES, and the tools used by GIMDES during the process. Secondary data were used for the purpose in supporting and improving the reliability of the categories which are created by using data gathered from interviews. Information about secondary data sources used in the study are given in Table 2.

**Table 1** Information about interviews

Interviewee	Title	Educational background	Duration of interview (h)
Executive 1	CEO	Mechanical Engineer, PhD degree	3
Staff 1	Food Examination and Inspection	Food Engineer	1
Staff 2	Food Examination and Inspection	Chemist	1

**Table 2** Information about secondary data

Reference	Date of Publication
Food Report Rewritten (9th Publication) (Book, Author, Dr. Engineer Hüseyin Kami Büyükozer)	2012
GIMDES Book of International Halal Food Conferences (contains presentations of 2, 3, and 4; International Halal Food Conferences held in 2009, 2010, and 2011)	2012
Updated list of Food with Halal Certificate as of 21 May 2013	2013
Updated list of Food with Halal Certificate as of 1 January 2014	2014
GIMDES Operations Book	–
GIMDES Journal (2013 issues)	2013
GIMDES Website ( <a href="http://www.gimdes.org">http://www.gimdes.org</a> )	2014

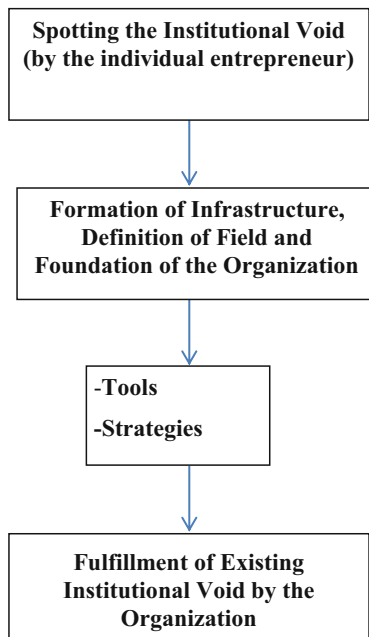
## 5 GIMDES (Food and Consumer Products Inspection and Certification Research Association)

GIMDES started its operations with respect to halal product and its certification in Turkey in 2005. However, it began issuing halal certificates following the year 2008 when it was invited to the meeting of World Halal Council (WHC) in Thailand and became a member of this international umbrella organization in this field (GIMDES 2011). The purpose of the association, GIMDES (Food and Consumer Products Inspection and Certification Research Association), and its suborganization which functions as an economic unit (GIMDES Halal Products Research Institute) are stated as researching and certifying halal and healthy products which are considered to be the essential part of healthy life for Muslims in Turkey. The association specializes in the fields of food, cosmetics, and health products ([www.gimdes.com.tr](http://www.gimdes.com.tr)).

Among other activities, the association also publishes GIMDES bulletin bimonthly and books about its operations. Moreover, the association held six Halal Food Symposiums: the first on 24 February 2008, the second on 25–26 April 2009, the third on 30 September to 3 October 2010, the fourth on 13–14 October 2011, the fifth on 1 September 2012, and the sixth on 7 September 2013 in Istanbul ([www.gimdes.org](http://www.gimdes.org)). The association gave halal certificates to 246 products until May 2013 (Updated list of updated products with Halal certificate as of May 21, 2013), and this number increased to 307 in June 2015 (Updated list of products with Halal certificate as of May 21, 2015).

## 6 Findings

Although there was a cognitive “halal product and halal consumption” awareness in the society before and during the establishment of GIMDES, it is known that no legal or normative framework existed in the field. It is seen that GIMDES which started as the first institution and organizational actor operating in the field of halal product certification in Turkey acted to undertake an institutional entrepreneur or agency role to establish and fill the voids in this field. However, it should be noted that there was an individual actor, who was aware about halal products and certification, in the field as a creator of GIMDES. Therefore, GIMDES’s attempt to form the field and in particular filling voids in the field as an organizational actor can be basically identified as an instrumental role attributed to GIMDES by an individual actor (founder of GIMDES). In a more technical saying, an individual actor, who was aware about the voids in this field cognitively, established the organization called GIMDES which can be considered as a tool to fill in the voids in this field. This process is presented below:



## ***6.1 Spotting the Institutional Void***

First stage of the foundation of GIMDES started with the trip of the founder (individual actor) abroad in 1981 for educational purposes. It can be stated that the actor who went to Germany developed awareness of halal foods which have never defined cognitively, legally, or normatively in this country. At that point, the individual actor started to consume products with kosher certificate which have similar characteristics (even more strict to some extent) with halal, instead of halal products in virtue of some environmental factors' effect. Therefore, the awareness that the individual actor has developed for consuming halal products, started with his movement to a totally different institutional order at societal level. This actor and the awareness he possesses also led him to start developing awareness toward halal product certification after he met consumption elements that he was not used to in his consumption habits and helped him step forward. In this regard, the founder of GIMDES's following statement is striking for understanding this finding clearly:

After returning to Turkey, my children were like they had their independence. Including the shopping store, we resided in the neighborhood that we set up ourselves. We said 'go and get whatever you want from the shop.' But surprisingly the children returned shortly and they did not get anything. To our question why they did not buy anything they answered 'every product you forbid to eat in Germany are here in this store.' After this incidence we decided to start about halal product and certification since we thought the knowledge we gained in Germany would be useful here in Turkey (Executive 1).

## ***6.2 Creation of Infrastructure, Definition of the Field, and Establishment of the Organization***

Then, the mentioned individual actor conducted researches for nearly 30 years about the halal food and published his book named "(Rewritten) Food Report" first issue of which was in 1986 following eight issues more in the years with updated and expanded forms. Furthermore, the actor organized and joined in the meetings about halal product internationally in different years and, starting from his close circumstance, succeeded in taking the attention of people in Turkey about halal food and halal food consumption. The actor put his effort in the activities of creating awareness and getting public support by discussing both health-related issues and problems with respect to Islam about the subject. Then, the actor together with fellows who were interested in this subject like the actor got into more detailed studies about halal and halal product. They explored that there was no state, private, or civic society sector organization to determine or approve halal food standardization or certification; therefore, no institutional field or regulation existed which was thought to be a deficiency, and they founded GIMDES (Food and Consumption Products Inspection and Certification Association) in 2005 to fill in this void and operate in this field. It was decided that existing voids should be filled by an NGO



instead of other forms of organizations. Because the private sector seems not interested in halal product, they see it as a burden of extra work to themselves, and they thought about organizations that work solely for profit purpose. Political environment during the foundation of the organization also prevented them leaving the studies about halal to the state organizations or at least creation of an expectation that the state would soon do it since it was not suitable to conduct studies like halal during the period. It was noticed in our interviews that the actor had an idea that state was not convenient to establish and function a process of halal system as they stressed halal food subject was a very sensitive subject with regard to religion due to the political structure and functioning of the state then. Therefore, it was stated that the state should not interfere with halal product and certification work; the state relatively attempted to behave subjectively; it could increase the boundaries of this relativity; and so, the halal system which is designed for civic society should be regulated by civic as well. The founder actor's following statements about the process bear importance:

After returning to Turkey in 1984, I shared my knowledge and the results of my research that I collected in Germany with a book that I published in 1986. However, the process of studying on halal product was not an easy process. At first people laughed at me. They said “we are already Muslims, are you trying to teach new tricks to old dogs? All the products raised and grown here are halal already. Have you brought your mind in Germany to here?”

The state did not have any study on this subject then. It tended to follow the applications of Europe totally and adopt and implement the system that existed in Europe. Almost none of the state institutions that might be related to the subject had any study. We already did not want the state to interfere in this business. Because it was not possible to conduct a job highly sensitive with respect to religion in an environment which we think crowded with officials who had the idea that “I do my job and get my salary” and in the existing bureaucratic situation. Even, I thought the state should not be near this. We just expected related state units to make necessary adjustments to the legal framework about this subject. Private sector totally considered this work to improve their sales ratings. Therefore this job needed to be done by independent autonomous organizations (NGOs) other than the state and private sector. That is how GIMDES was born as a fruit of this approach (Executive 1).

### ***6.3 Filling Existing Institutional Voids by the Organization***

As an organizational actor, GIMDES used various strategies and tools to achieve its function as stated in the definition of operational field of the organization as “putting effort in research activities to understand the ingredients used in the food, medicine, detergents and cosmetics products that are either produced or imported for consumers, analyzing the additive substances used during the production of mentioned products and establishing halal standards and certification procedure” ([www.gimdes.org](http://www.gimdes.org)). The founder of GIMDES stressed the purpose of the association as follows:

The purpose of our institution is to save Muslim's halal which is a religious issue for them and which we think is constrained by several barriers, to establish the conditions of 'halal' and 'tayyip' as stated in the Kuran, to increase the awareness of the society and help sustain

in the reformation of conscious Muslim profile and to operate not only in the fields of food, cosmetics and medicine but expanding 'halal' in every part of life for instance, putting efforts to adjust the service in the hotels and restaurants suitable to Islamic circumstances. With the most general expression, locating halal life system which is not only an issue for Muslim societies but also to all humanity's wellbeing in their lives (Executive 1).

GIMDES used various tools and strategies to fill this void. They are given below:

#### *Tools*

- Qualified human resources in their fields (i.e., halal)
- Training activities for expertise (conferences, seminars, panels, and establishment of a vocational high school)
- Published and visual materials to create awareness (books, periodicals such as journals and bulletins)
- Halal Product Certificates
- World Halal Day
- Halal chains
- Membership to related international organizations

#### *Strategies*

- Creating social awareness
- In order to be known in the domestic market, putting forth the activities on export products
- Developing infrastructure elements (adopting standards abroad, determining the norms for halal product and certification, etc.)
- Promotional activities (promoting the standards)
- Dissemination of knowledge (putting effort to expand the standards so that everyone knows about them)
- Pursuance (inspection, etc. activities)

## **7 Discussion and Conclusion**

The study is about why and how an NGO filled an institutional void in an industry. Within the scope of the study, one of the pioneer organization in Turkey, GIMDES, was investigated, and in this regard, activities of GIMDES on halal product certification were discussed through collected data from primary and secondary resources.

Findings of the study demonstrate that organization come into existence for specific interests as stated in the agency subject, one of the contemporary topics discussed particularly under new institutional theory. The study also provides basis for the assumption that an agency can be based on an individual (human) or a unit (organization). However, it should be noted here clearly that the current study's contribution to the literature is that it demonstrates related actors can take some strategic choices such as filling an institutional void and another is the identification

of tools and strategies used by the organization in particular in filling institutional voids.

The data used in the structuring of the study focuses on one case study, and scant interviews conducted constitute constraints in the generalization of the findings. Therefore, future studies can eliminate the issues related to validity and reliability of the findings on condition that they are conducted by multi-case studies, by reaching more primary data sources or even a comparative case study.

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