

## **Managing Organizational Legitimacy: A Case for Waste Management Companies in Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

*Waste management is an essential part of any nation to ensure environmental sustainability. However, due to rapid urbanization and growth of population, the nation still struggles to execute proper waste management practices due to underlying problems such as limited information on proper waste management and recycling as well as unsystematic analysis and subpar documentation. Waste management companies have an obligation to rectify said issues by emphasizing and managing legitimacy to increase their accountability and improve their level of services. Organizational legitimacy is a tool that enables waste management organizations to ensure that the organizational objectives are in congruence with the social values, beliefs, and norms to inculcate green behavior. This study is non-empirical based and reviews past and current literature of legitimacy and ways that organizations manage it. This conceptual paper aims to address how managing organizational legitimacy enables better waste management performance through two approaches, namely the strategic and institutional approach. The analysis of these approaches is hoped to assist waste management organizations to effectively implement their services aside from producing an environmentally conscious society that practices sustainable behaviour.*

**Keywords:** *waste management, organizational legitimacy, legitimacy management, institutional approach, strategic approach*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

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One of the main challenges of any nation is the progression towards achieving urbanization, industrialization, and globalization. The rapid transitioning of urbanization and social transformation is at the cost of waste generation increment. Malaysia's solid waste generation consists of mainly municipal solid waste (64%) and the rest are made up of industrial, commercial and construction waste (EA-SWMC, 2009). It is projected that for the next 10 years, the solid waste generation will increase by more than 90% (Jalil, 2010) along with the growth of the population (Periathamby & Fauziah, 2011). Malaysia's waste is mainly managed by the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (MHLG). The Malaysian National Solid Waste Management Department formulates general environmental and waste management policies along with strategies under the provision of Act 672 while the Solid Waste Management and Public Cleansing Corporation implements said policies and at the same time oversees the services provided by other private concessionaries.

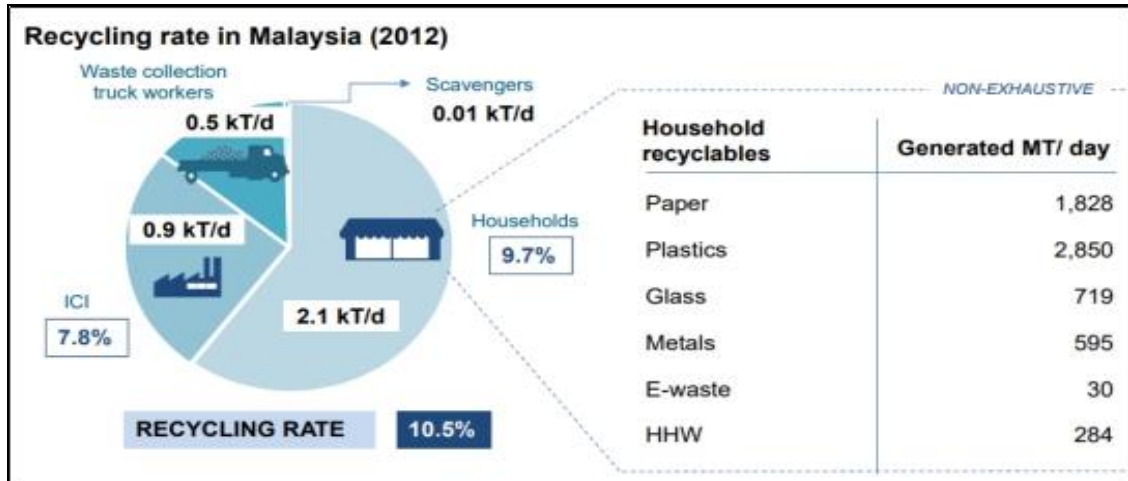


Figure 1: Recycling rate in Malaysia in 2012.

Source: Performance Management & Delivery Unit Annual Report (2015).

Based on Figure 1, it is clearly visible that domestic waste produced by households are the main type of waste generated as it makes up for over half of the total waste production. In addressing this very problem, the government implemented several strategies under the Ninth Malaysian Plan (2006-2020) in which one of the main goals was to improve the quality of life in terms of standard and sustainability. This is in line with the National Strategic Plan for Solid Waste Management (NSPSWM) to ensure sustainable and integrated waste management. The Local Government Act 1976 (Act 171) allocated that the local authority will undertake obligatory and discretionary activities while providing waste management services and amenities to the urban residents. These activities also include the collection and disposal of solid waste that will be carried out by the concessionaries, operators, or local authorities. At international level, the United Nations has come out with a first legally binding instrument against corruption known as United Nations Convention on Corruption (hereinafter referred to as UNCAC) of which provides comprehensive sets of standards, measures and rules on matters concerning corruption. The UNCAC is open for ratification by all world countries and the signatories are required to ensure that their legal and regulatory regimes to fight corruption operate consistently with the signed instrument.

## AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to understand how managing the organizational legitimacy can affect the organizational legitimacy of waste management companies in improving their level of services. This is also to study also aims to determine how a country like Malaysia can cater its waste management crisis that is ongoing and emerging aside from ensuring environmental sustainability in the long term. The problem statement and literature further extend the development of this study.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY**

Waste management is an integral part of any nation as it determines the sustainability of resources, environment, and life, without which all will cease to exist. It was initially introduced as an environmental effort that primarily focused on conserving resources. However over time it evolved to become a benchmark for the entire business industry (Herbohn, Walker Loo, 2014; Przychodzen & Przychodzen, 2013). It is even acknowledged under the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) concept of sustainability which consists of three pillars of economy, environment, and society (Yu & Zhao, 2015). This study serves to provide alternatives to waste management approaches that could improve the current services provided, increase public awareness, and promote their participation in reducing waste. Most significantly, this study hopes to increase the accountability of waste management organizations in delivering accountable services, not only in collecting waste, but also properly segregating it, and managing it for final disposal, thereby leading to long term sustainability of life and resources. This goal is also applicable to the organization to ensure their survivability which is subjective to the amount of support they gain through legitimacy.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Malaysia is rapidly developing with an estimated population of 29 million which generates a staggering amount of 30 000 tons of waste daily in 2012 (Alias, Manaf, & Abdullah 2018). There are 10.9 million tons of solid waste being generated annually. In 2015, the waste generated has increased to 38 000 tons daily thus amounting to 12.8 million tons per annum. The amount is predicted to increase to 15.6 million tons annually by the year 2020 (Agamuthu & Dennis, 2011; SWCOP, 2014; Harian Metro, 2016). The management of solid waste is becoming more of a major problem nowadays due to the complex nature of collection, segregation, and recycling as well as methods of final disposal. There is also the lack of proper management for municipal solid waste that has become a global concern for sustainability (Ali et al., 2018). The severity of said issue as addressed by the government upon the drinking water supply contamination from landfill leachate in 2006 which led to the immediate closing of harmful disposal sites (Periathamby, Khidzir, & Fauziah, 2009). Our nation still falls short in proper waste management system (Periathamby et al., 2009) which is why there needs to be a change in accountability and system for better services. Another main problem for the Malaysian government is to achieve the optimal recycling rate by 2020 with limited time as well as resources in spite of the urgency for proper waste management. The statistics for waste management and recycling rate are as follow:

- There is approximately 80% of municipal household wastes that are potentially recyclable materials. However these wastes are normally treated as disposable materials and dumped into landfills or disposal sites (Sumiani et al., 2009).
- Malaysia has a vision of having at least 22% of total solid waste being recycled in order to achieve Vision 2020. However, statistics prove that this is a far-fetched dream since the current rate as of 2011 is only 5% (Periathamby, Fauziah, & Hamid, 2010).

Since the ongoing problem persists nationally, the approach taken to rectify this issue needs to be scrutinized so that every state in the nation will be able to achieve the same ultimate goal. In doing so, the most imperative party to be noted is the waste management organizations that serve the respective households as they are the main party that provide waste management services. According to Samsudin and Don (2013) there are six factors that influence sustainable waste management namely public health, environmental protection, resource value of waste, closing the loop, institutional and responsibility issues, and public awareness. Waste management organizations are generally perceived as legitimate since they directly provide services to the public while having their organizational objectives in line with the social norms, values, beliefs, and expectations. Thus, maintaining the legitimacy attained should be a priority in order to ensure continuity in support and long-term resource which inevitably determines their organization's survivability.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Organizational Legitimacy***

Legitimacy is defined as a generalized perception that desirable, proper, and appropriate actions are being taken by organizations in order to match and act appropriately according to the norms of the social construct, values and beliefs (Suchman, 1995; Oliver 1996). It is considered as vital for organizational survival as it acts as a pre-requisite for continuous resource and support by the organization's stakeholders (Parsons, 1960; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Weber, 1978). This will allow them to gain access to the necessary resources for survival and development for the firm. It is also sought as an essential theoretical aspect in understanding how companies can develop various important aspects such as innovation on enterprise growth and development (Li, Chen, & Ma, 2016).

Similar to this context, waste management organizations require the support of the public, which could only be achieved if they meet the public's expectations. Once they do, it falls onto the organization to manage it to ensure their continued survival. From the perspective of the legitimacy theory, the corporations are perceived to be bound by the social contract that compels them to be involved in societal activities in order to attain the approval of their company's existence which in return shall safeguard the organization's foreseeable future (Emtairah, Tareq, & Mont, 2008; Ladisma, Abdullah, & Lokman, 2016). Thus, it is prevalent to note here the irrefutable role that legitimacy plays in ensuring any organization's future. It does not simply happen upon recognition, instead it is an ever-going process that is used as a check and balance tool for organizations to earn their stay in providing for the society. These organizations must gain both internal and external acknowledgment for their institutional rights and to be legitimated (Ladisma, Abdullah, & Lokman, 2017).

Table 1: *Types of legitimacy*

<b>Types of Legitimacy</b>	<b>Operationalization</b>	<b>Applied</b>
Regulatory Legitimacy	An organization is legitimated when it follows regulatory process, rules, standards, and expectations created by governments or professional associations.	Financial legitimacy (Deephouse & Carter, 2005)
Normative (Moral) Legitimacy	An organization is legitimated when it follows social values and standards in which the organization exists.	Managerial legitimacy & technical legitimacy (Reuf & Scott, 1998) Organizational legitimacy (Massey, 2001)
Cognitive Legitimacy	An organization is legitimated when it is perceived as taken-for-granted.	N/A
Pragmatic Legitimacy	An organization is legitimated when it satisfies an individual or the public's interests.	N/A

Source: Ladisma, Abdullah, & Lokman (2017). Rhetorical View of Corporate Legitimacy

Table 1 shows the four main types of legitimacy that is relevantly applicable to organizations namely regulatory, normative, cognitive, and pragmatic legitimacy. The first is regulatory legitimacy where organizations need to abide by the rules, regulations, standards, and expectations by the government. The second is normative legitimacy in which the organizations must follow the social values and standard that it sets out for itself. The third is cognitive legitimacy which is assumed that an organization's services provide natural methods of services which leads to a form of collective action (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006) and lastly pragmatic legitimacy where the organization's audience consisting of their stakeholders and the public believe that they will obtain some benefits from the organization's actions. Waste management organizations should apply all aspects of these types of legitimacy as they are necessary in ensuring their sustainability. However managing the legitimacy requires a different approach.

### ***Managing Legitimacy***

The management of legitimacy is recognized as the third influencing factor to organizational legitimacy (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999). Once an organization attains the legitimacy status, the organization has a responsibility in managing the legitimacy (Suchman, 1995). The appropriateness of various strategies used to manage legitimacy depends on the conditions of social acceptance, (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006) which means that the organization should identify the most suitable method to manage their legitimacy according to their respective social and environmental surroundings. Hence, strategies to manage legitimacy would rely on aspects such as communication between the organization and their audience (Elsbach, 1994). For organizations to successfully manage legitimacy, it would also require several different techniques aside from situational awareness which helps to garner the public response (Mousa, 2010).

The underlying notion here is that the organizations must disclose their social and environmental efforts and reports to prove to the stakeholders and the public that they remain consistent to the social norms, beliefs and expectations (Kuruppu & Milne, 2016). The sources of legitimacy are the internal and external stakeholders who evaluate organizations, and make certain perceptions relating to legitimacy (Deephouse et al., 2017). Organizational audience, which in this context refers to the household residents in which they serve, are considered as their stakeholders, who are essential in providing support through their satisfactory level. Public response and their satisfactory level determine the support and participation in organizational activities. This is crucial in ensuring the long-term operation of the waste management organizations (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992). In the very context of this study, it would simply mean that the household resident's evaluation and satisfactory level of services would affect their willingness to support or comply with any strategies, initiatives, or campaigns implemented by the organizations. Without public support and compliance, waste management organization's efforts to achieve environmental sustainability aside from properly managing waste, are futile.

Several frameworks from available literature suggest that legitimacy is a process (Suddaby, Bitektine, & Haack, 2017) and to manage it would require diverse processes or formulations of specific legitimacy-related strategies by the actors to win their stakeholder's trust (Scherer, Palazzo, & Seidl, 2013). Strategies to manage legitimacy may focus on how organizations understand, balance, and respond to public demand in several ways (Kraatz & Block, 2008). The strategies can be executed in two ways which is either technology-driven or analogue (Baptista et al., 2016) which could be used to circulate the idea (Tavakoli, Schlagwein, & Schoder, 2017) as well as allowing for communication on strategy deployment (Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017). Suchman (1995) proposed two main approaches in managing legitimacy which is strategic and institutional approach. These two approaches are believed to assist waste management organizations in managing their legitimacy status which in the foreseeable future would amount to transparency and accountability in service delivery as well as achieving proper waste management practice and environmental sustainability.

### ***Strategic Approach***

The first approach perceives legitimacy as an 'operational resource' (Suchman, 1995) which is considered as manageable and influenceable by the organization itself (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1995). Several studies have sought to understand legitimation in pluralistic contexts which focuses on three main agency-intensive legitimation strategies which are manipulation, adaptation, and argumentation (Morton, Wilson, & Cooke, 2018). These strategies are considered as the logical legitimation strategies that could be used in responding to "incompatible expectations of different audiences" (Baumann-Pauly, Scherer, & Palazzo, 2016). Legitimacy is further extended as the organization's ability in effectively manipulating and executing symbols to garner social support (Suchman, 1995). However, the reality is that organizations merely deem this as a tool to appear consistent to the normative demands of society (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006) and to endorse the organization's reputation (Ashfort & Gibbs, 1990; Fombrun, 2001). This is a very common occurrence in waste management where the implementation of practices such as recycling campaigns and policies are employed as manipulation tools to garner support.

The act of manipulation in this context refers to positioning organizations to actively influence the social expectations by persuading or manipulating the perceptions of key stakeholders in their environment (Morton, Wilson, & Cooke, 2018). When an organization successfully manages legitimacy through passive compliance with active manipulation, then it will ensure their own survivability. Suchman (1995) further believes organization that manages their legitimacy well are more likely perceived as meaningful and trustworthy, while organizations with low and fragile legitimacy risk the perception of being inconsistent and less stable. Hence the next step for waste management organizations to ensure proper practice is to manage their legitimacy to be perceived as meaningful and trustworthy. The public support gained from legitimation will be effectively applied in the public participation and compliance to the waste management and any other environmental awareness campaigns in hopes of reducing waste.

Strategic legitimacy studies depict legitimacy as an operational resource that organizations extract from the cultural environment in which they pursue their organizational goals (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). The researchers pursuing this view generally assumes there is a high level of managerial control that exists over the process of legitimation. This explicitly contrasts the almost limitless flexibility of symbols and rituals against the external cause of origins constrained by resistance of tangible outcomes such as the budgets, sales, and profits (Pfeffer, 1981). Therefore, the theorist of this approach predicts recurrent conflicts to occur between the organization's managers and internal parties over organizational activities. This is due to the managerial nature of strictness and favorability of rigidity, economy of symbolism, and the contrary of substantive response preferred by the internal parties (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). Legitimation in this perspective is rather calculative, purpose-oriented, and constantly oppositional (Suchman, 1995).

In the case of waste management practices, some forms of rigidity are appropriate as it ensures the execution of proper standards of procedures. However, in order to ensure that it becomes holistically effective, there is a need for better or more effective communication between the managers as well as their constituents where the exchange of ideas to manage waste in a more sustainable way should be considered. Although in most cases conflicts and crisis are deemed necessary as they ensure continual improvements to be made to better manage crisis in preparations, waste management organizations should still adopt the perspective of theorists which is being calculated, purposeful and constantly oppositional. The reason being is that they warrant the utilization of resources thus avoiding any waste and this is consistent with the organizational objectives in serving the public with accountability and transparency.

### ***Institutional Approach***

The second approach is derived from the cultural embeddedness of an organization which is displayed aligning with the social norms, values, and beliefs (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Oliver, 1996). This approach perceives organizational legitimacy as a continuous and unconsciously adopted process where organizations respond to external expectation. In the context of waste management, the public demand is an ever-changing matter as it depends on emerging and ongoing issues. Managing legitimacy is therefore assumed as limited (Suchman, 1995) and only under certain circumstances will organizations resist to adapt (Oliver, 1991; Zaid, Morrill, & Rao, 2003). This approach is also

perceived as effective as it takes into consideration the proper allocation and utilization of capital and resources of an organization.

According to Suchman (1995), this approach also amounts to depicting legitimacy as a set of constitutive beliefs. Similar to any other field or industry, the resources of waste management are limited to managing the abundance of waste generated, hence this approach answers the call for better scrutiny in managing said resources to ensure that no allocation is being placed on redundant or useless efforts. In this approach, organizations do not simply extract legitimacy from its environment via cultural exploitation but rather it is the external institutions that construct and internalize the organization in every aspect (Suchman, 1995). This scenario is highly encouraged as the practice of waste management is a bilateral effort because without one or the other, the chances of achieving the end goal are ultimately reduced.

The cultural definitions would fixate how the organization would be built and governed, as well as how it is understood and assessed. Legitimacy and institutionalization are perceived as synonymous since both empower the organizations by making it meaningful and natural. In the eyes of the institutionalists, the explanation of legitimacy strategy is to demonstrate how this approach allows organizations to acquire support from its constituents (Suchman, 1995). Therefore, this approach is less likely to induce manager-stakeholder conflict as it allows for more room to exchange ideas and communicate better. Thus, this approach could potentially resolve the current waste management crisis should the organizations choose to adopt it. All in all, both strategies could be applied and adopted by the waste management companies. The hybridization of legitimization strategies is also a viable option since it allows for the dynamics to shift from typical control in the firm via manipulation of stakeholders to clearly defined strategies of deliberation, which includes non-hierarchical platforms that control discussions through social media (Castello, Etter, & Nielsen, 2016).

## **MODEL APPLIED**

The model applied for this study is the integrated waste management system that applies a more sustainable method in managing wastes. A model country that applies this model is Singapore which also has a more sustainable waste management plan. By adopting the sustainable practice of waste management of a developed country, the potential of achieving a higher quality outcome is more plausible and more tangible. However, the outline in developing a model for sustainability in terms of integration often requires technological advancement to boost progress (Wilson, Velis, & Rodic, 2014). This is viewed as an investment by the nation itself since the goal of achieving waste management efficiency would benefit the economy and the society. Malaysia currently applies a waste management plan that consists of policies and programs, technologies, and conventional methods of disposal such as landfills, incineration, and a small amount of recycling (Sin et al., 2013). This approach could be improved further by adapting to the model system in order to reduce the number of wastes while encouraging sustainability of the environment.



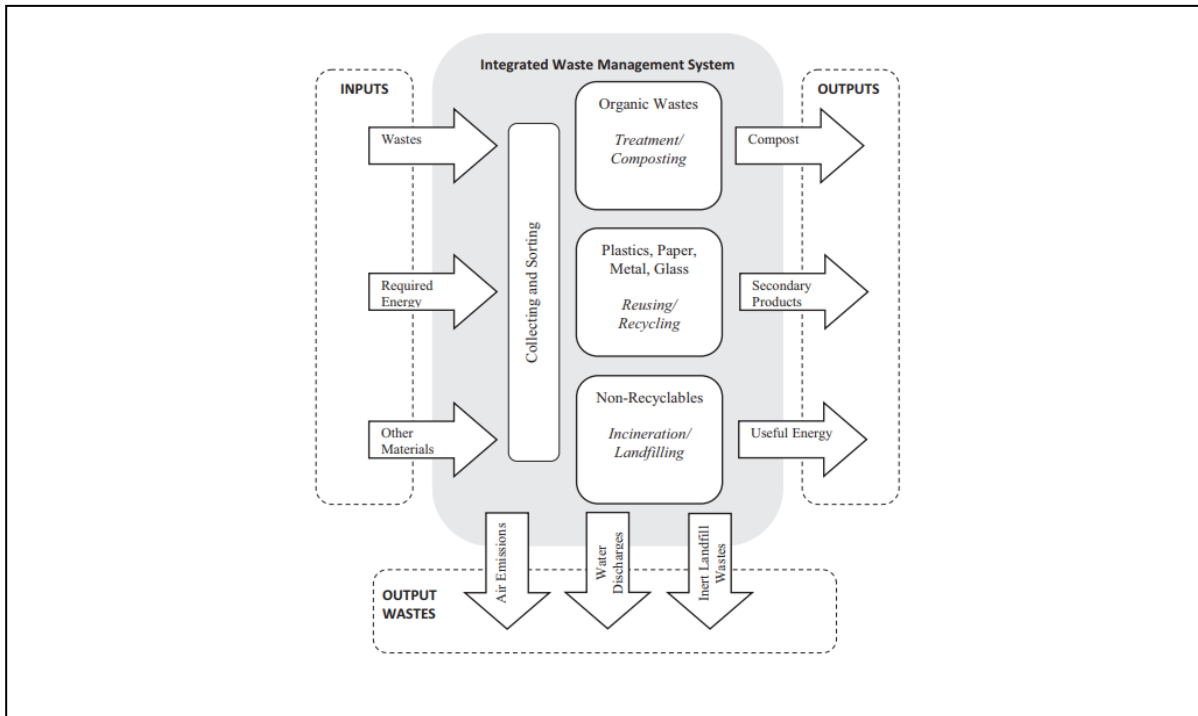


Figure 2: A framework for an integrated waste management system.

Source: A Framework for Sustainable Waste Management: Challenges and Opportunities (2015).

Figure 2 shows the basis for a sustainable waste management system that can be applicable for any nations heading towards that direction. The elements are depicted to show the components that are required to achieve sustainability. The framework focuses on the economic, environmental, and social aspects of sustainability (Oviatt & McDougall, 2005). Generally, the municipal waste collection system for both commercial and residential areas utilize the energy generated from the input to run the machines that treat and recover waste materials including those that can serve as raw materials for secondary product manufacturing. (Elsaid & Aghezzaf, 2015). Unsorted wastes will go through a process that sorts out and separates recoverable materials. Recyclable materials such as plastics, paper, metal, and glass are cleaned to remove impurities and then moved to the separation phase.

The separation phase will sort all plastic materials according to their resin type, glass according to their color, and metals according to their type (Elsaid & Aghezzaf, 2015). The materials are then crushed and melted before they are moulded into secondary products. The framework also sorts wastes into recyclables and non-recyclables, which will then be incinerated. The organic wastes will be composted, fermented, or incinerated to produce energy that contributes back to the nation in a sustainable manner. The output for this framework is believed to contribute in various aspects that benefit the society through its ability to manage waste and generate energy for the foreseeable future. Although there are some minor repercussions, - they are still very much manageable compared to the traditional methods of landfilling and open dumping. All the strategies and initiatives applied, when

combined are believed to be the ultimate model for any nation to achieve waste management sustainability. Therefore, this model is deemed fit to be integrated into the current model for Malaysia to apply as a steppingstone in achieving sustainable waste management that ultimately leads to a sustainable environment.

## **SCOPE OF STUDY**

The scope of the study in this paper is to understand how the current practice of waste management in our nation can be improved through managing organizational legitimacy via two approaches namely institutional and strategic approach. It is unclear whether the current practice is applying any other approaches, but it is very clear that there is a dire need to improve the practice to ensure the sustainability of environment. This study will be conducted at a national level to identify the new forms of waste management practice especially for the concessionaries and private organizations as they are the responsible parties in delivering services to the general public. Hence, they have a duty of care to ensure that their services reflect the integrity and quality of their businesses. This matter however also concerns the municipal councils and private concessionaries in their respective territories. For example, Shah Alam, Selangor is managed by the Majlis Bandaraya Shah Alam. Hence they are responsible in ensuring that the waste is managed effectively to ensure the environmental sustainability. They are also the most relevant authority that should adopt the organizational legitimacy approach in practicing their business and delivering their services to the household residents and the general public.

## **CONCLUSION**

As conclusion, the management of waste is a practice that should constantly evolve and improve as it determines the future of mankind. Not only should it continuously be evaluated, it should also be reviewed in a timely manner to ensure that the practice implemented meets the needs of the problem and caters to any emerging and ongoing issues as well. Moreover, the concept of organizational legitimacy and the proper means to manage it should also be applied to businesses in other industries as it allows for more meaningful services to be provided to the public. In this day of age with so many ventures thriving, the notion of legitimacy should not be compromised, but rather scrutinized to uphold the organizational constitutions. This study should be considered as an alternative to the current practice as it calls for the accountability of waste management organizations in delivering their services and seeing it through to the end without any forms of manipulation. The idea proposed in this paper is hoped to enlighten both the company and the household residents through active collaboration in activities and policies regarding environmental preservation and sustainability. Not only will there be more transparency and accountability on the part of the companies, this raises awareness to the household residents on the importance of segregating and managing waste aside from inculcating recycling behaviour. The collaboration of both parties would eventually foster mutual trust and cooperation as they both will recognize the importance that each role plays in attaining the end goal. There are still some limitations to this study. It is idealistic to assume that the implementation would take place smoothly as the lack of awareness on the importance of legitimacy and the challenges in integrating household residents as stakeholders make it difficult for some parties to understand the need to bring attention to this matter. There is also the fact that different states and districts apply different regulations on waste management thus the general

adaptation of this proposed idea would be somewhat incompatible or redundant for some. Albeit the limitations that exists, there are always new opportunities to introduce new ideas especially when issues such as climate change and pollutions exist so predominantly. It gives the public hope that there is still room for change and that they are able to make those changes with steps as small as segregating waste and actively participating with environmental initiatives.

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