

“Localness,” Organizational Attributes, and Civic Engagement with Civil Society

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Abstract

Civil society organizations (CSOs) can serve as facilitators of collective action. This makes understanding engagement with CSOs critical to the study of the collective action problem. This paper argues that whether an organization is perceived as local is a key determinant of whether individuals will engage with it. I use a conjoint survey experiment to test how organizational attributes that signal localness influence respondents’ willingness to attend a hypothetical organization’s meetings. I find that individuals are more likely to choose organizations that are more local in nature, except when it comes to funding, where there are no detectable differences as funding source varies. These findings imply that an individual’s level of comfort with a CSO matters for engagement; thus, CSOs need to consider their localness when reaching out to potential joiners. In addition, donors seeking to support CSOs need to pay attention to their impacts on localness.

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Introduction

Citizens need to solve the collective action problem in order to hold governments accountable. Just providing citizens with information, however, is usually not enough to spur accountability (Mansuri and Rao, 2013; Fearon, Humphreys and Weinstein, 2015; Dunning et al., 2019). Civil society organizations (CSOs) can play a large role in helping individuals overcome the collective action problem, either by helping them use the information they have, or lowering the costs of claim making (Gugerty and Kremer, 2008; Grossman, 2014). Nevertheless, there is a lot of variation in how effective CSOs are in this regard. Some CSOs seem well suited to spurring collective action, whereas others struggle to engage their communities. Although Olson (1971)’s seminal work reframed the question of why individuals engage with organizations, we still know little about when organizations will effectively engage individuals. In this paper, I contribute to this literature by testing a theory of how an organization’s *localness* affects civic engagement with it.

An organization that wants to mobilize individuals needs to engage them. As Olson (1971) theorized, however, for individuals to engage in political action through an organization, the expected benefits must outweigh the costs of engagement. Organizations can offer individuals material or expressive benefits in return for their involvement, but individuals may have limited time or resources to participate. I argue that how “local” an organization seems can affect the cost-benefit analysis an individual undergoes when faced with the choice of whether or not to engage with that organization. Localness is individual-focused; I define a *local* organization as one that reflects the individual who considers engaging with it. I theorize four types of localness: geographic, resource-based, demographic, and political localness.

I use a forced-choice conjoint survey experiment conducted in Malawi to test how different organizational attributes impact individuals’ willingness to engage with a hypothetical CSO. The strength of the conjoint is that it allows me to test different potential cues for localness. I vary where the organization was founded, where it gets its funding, the former profession

of its leader, and its political connections. These attributes provide information about the localness of an organization.

The experimental results support the theory, with the local level largely preferred over the other levels within each attribute, although the source of funding did not seem to matter to individuals. This has important implications. These findings are encouraging for aid groups that fund local organizations instead of starting their own programs. Nevertheless, they show that aid to organizations in the developing world can backfire, undermining donors' goals, if donor pressures cause organizations to be perceived as less local. In the developing world, aid to organizations has led to changes in their structure and makeup, making them less local (Murdie, 2014). These results have a broader application as well; they underscore that organizations that fail to reflect their constituencies may struggle to mobilize them, and therefore may impair citizens' ability to hold their governments accountable across the world.

Localness and Organizations

When offered the possibility of engaging with an organization — donating money, volunteering, or becoming a member, for example — individuals face a simple choice: to engage or to abstain. The traditional explanation for this choice states that individuals make a cost-benefit analysis (Olson, 1971). The *nature* of costs and benefits has been the focus of much research; Olson (1971) focused mainly on material benefits, although he did discuss so-called expressive benefits as well. Wilson (1973), however, argued that individuals become involved with organizations for a variety of mostly non-economic reasons, as the likelihood that an organization could offer enough economic incentives to outweigh fully any costs is low. Organizations can also offer “intangible rewards arising out of the act of associating” with an organization (33-34). Empirical work at the time seemed to confirm that these types of social incentives better explained why individuals wanted to participate in collective action than material rewards (Mitchell, 1979; Opp, 1983; Klandermans, 1984; McAdam, 1986).

One social factor that seemingly affects the cost-benefit calculus is the match of the

identity between the organization and the individual (Klandermans, 2007). Prior research has shown that individuals are more likely to engage in collective action when they identify more strongly with an organization or group and with the goal of the collective action itself (Simon et al., 1998; Foreman and Whetten, 2002; van Zomeren, Leach and Spears, 2010). In other words, if the organization seems to be part of the in-group, from the perspective of the potential joiner, then that individual should be more open to engaging with that organization.

One of the clearest us-them distinctions is between insiders and outsiders in a community, or locals and strangers. If individuals believe that an organization represents the “strangers” they may be less willing to engage with it. Conversely, however, if individuals believe that an organization represents the “locals,” they may be more open to its advances, operations, and goals. Scholars of development have long asserted that organizations that do not reflect local customs will not be successful (Porter, 2003; Murdie, 2014; Guarrieri, 2018).¹ I propose an understanding of localness that is relative; I define a *local* organization as one that reflects the individual who considers engaging with it.

How local an organization seems therefore factors into an individual’s decision-making process. Individuals will prefer local organizations because these will be more likely to reflect their values and general goals. An organization’s localness can be a benefit in and of itself; it may be rewarding for individuals to be involved with an organization in which they feel comfortable. An organization’s localness may also impact the cost-benefit analysis by magnifying costs and decreasing potential benefits. Spending scant free time on an organization may seem like a less burdensome cost for an individual if the organization appears likely to reflect them, or if they will be among like-minded individuals.

¹A preference for the local has been well-documented in studies of consumer habits (Farris et al., 2019; Sichtmann, Davvetas and Diamantopoulos, 2019; Igelbrink, 2020). Sichtmann, Davvetas and Diamantopoulos (2019) define localness in a similar way: “the extent to which a brand is perceived as a player connected with the local country and embedded in its consumption culture” (598). Localness has also been shown to matter for electoral candidates, where “evidence of a candidate’s presence and roots ... within an electoral territory” helps them gain votes in those territories (Evans et al., 2017, 62).

Localness is a multi-faceted concept - an organization can be local in multiple ways. I theorize 4 different types of localness that may be important: geographic, resource-based, demographic, and political. These types of localness all imply that an organization's values and goals may match those of the individual, although in different ways and with different implications for how an organization may act.

Geographical localness is the most straightforward. A geographically local organization is one that is located close to an individual, either in founding or in terms of headquarters. This is how localness has most often been defined in the elections literature (Evans et al., 2017; Sofia, Collignon and Sajuria, 2018). All else equal, individuals can reasonably assume that an organization linked geographically to their area will be more likely to have their interests and values in mind.

Yet, geographic localness may not be all that matters. Just because an organization's headquarters are far away from a locality does not mean that it will not be perceived as local there in other ways. Resource-based localness refers to how local an organization's resource pool is; a local organization in terms of resources is one that draws support for its work from the local community, in contrast to one that relies exclusively on outside support, either from governments or private donors. Resources provided to an organization give a sense of ownership over it - if an organization gets its resources from the local community, individuals may believe that they have a greater ability to influence its programs and actions. As such, if a potential joiner knows that an organization depends on the joiner's community for support, they can expect, all else equal, that its priorities will reflect theirs.

Localness as described here does not have to be entirely spatial. Another way in which an organization can be local is in terms of demographics. A demographically local organization is made up of members who are similar to the individual considering engaging with it. Potential joiners can logically conclude that if an organization's members are demographically similar to them, they will fit in better and the organization's goals may be more likely to coincide with theirs.

Finally, an organization can be a political fit for a potential joiner; a politically local organization is one that matches the political demands and affiliations of the individual. This can also mean that *apolitical* organizations will be preferred over political ones, depending on the local context. For example, in countries where trust in parties and political institutions is low, people, unless they are committed partisans, will feel more at home in nonpartisan groups over politically affiliated ones. Individuals thinking about joining an organization will be more likely to join an organization when they expect to be politically compatible with it.

Localness is *perceived*, in the sense that individuals will subjectively assess, to a certain extent, what is considered local and what is not. As such, individuals take cues about the localness of an organization from what they may know about it—information that may be common knowledge or that the organization itself may share. Certain organizational attributes will provide information about different kinds of localness. For example, individuals may learn where an organization was founded as a cue about its geographic localness and where it gets its funding from as a cue of its resource-based localness. The occupation of its leader can be a cue of its demographic localness, and whether it is connected to a political party or not serves as a cue of its political localness. Individuals may or may not *consciously* consume these cues, but the cues will help them get a perception of whether an organization is likely to be local or not.

Experimental Design

I use a forced-choice conjoint survey experiment to test how selected characteristics of an organization, which cue different types of localness, influence individuals' evaluation of and desire to interact with that organization.² In this approach, individuals are shown two pairs of randomly created profiles and are asked to pick one or the other in response to one or more questions. Because localness is a multi-faceted concept, a conjoint is the ideal way of examining it. The conjoint design allows me to test how different attributes—and thereby

²This study was pre-registered with EGAP, ID: 20190201AA. Please see Appendix B for a discussion of changes made to the analysis.

different aspects of localness—of an organization matter to individuals.

The experiment was embedded in a larger survey carried out on 2,531 market vendors in 128 markets in Malawi in 2018 (see App. A for more information on the sample and survey design). The relatively homogeneous sample is a key strength of this experiment because it makes testing localness more straightforward. Vendors are an important social group in Malawi; they are generally well-organized, often boycotting taxes to pressure local governments and are active community members, helping to dispel the possibility that their responses on organizational involvement are just cheap talk. Malawi is also a suitable context for this study; there are many NGOs active in the country, both local and foreign, donor-organized and -led ones. Malawi has a relatively competitive electoral system, and there is a concrete citizen demand for accountability.

Each respondent saw two fully randomized pairs of hypothetical organizations, leading to four observations per person. Before each pair of profiles, respondents were told to imagine that there were two NGOs working in their area to promote free and fair elections in the 2019 presidential election. Campaigning for the election was ramping up during the time this study was fielded. The two profiles were presented to respondents as quasi-vignettes, with enumerators describing each organization in turn, making sure that the attributes of each organization were clear to the respondent. After each pair, respondents were asked which organization’s meeting they were most likely to attend, if each organization held a meeting in their village (see App. A for full question text). This question gets at the idea of engagement with an organization. While this is not a direct behavioral outcome, willingness to engage with an organization is a crucial component of the engagement process (Klandermans and Oegema, 1987).

The conjoint attributes were presented in the order in Table 1, with levels fully randomized for each profile. The four attributes get at four different aspects of localness. The first attribute examines how important the origin of an organization may be, representing geographic localness. The second tests demographic localness by getting at whether the

<i>Type of Localness - Attribute</i>	Levels:
<i>Geographic</i> - Founded in:	Capital of Western Donor, Capital of South Africa, Lilongwe, Your District Capital
<i>Demographic</i> - Leader used to be a:	Politician, Government bureaucrat, Business owner, Laborer, Carpenter, Market vendor
<i>Resource-Based</i> - Funding for work in your district comes from:	Western Donor government, Chinese government, South African government, Malawian government, Contributions from Malawian citizens
<i>Political</i> - Political affiliation:	Connected to a political party, Independent of any political party

Table 1: Attributes and Levels for Conjoint Survey Experiment

background of the leader or an organization matters to individuals. It exploits the nature of the sample, all market vendors. The third investigates how information about funding impacts willingness to engage with an organization; this reflects a cue for potential resource-based localness. The final attribute varies political affiliation as a cue for political localness. Within each attribute, the assumed most “local” level is listed last; the other levels could be considered as varying levels of foreignness, although without more detailed information from respondents, it is difficult to assess which is the most foreign. In all cases, I expected that the other levels would have lower support than the baseline hyper-local case.

Results

For the main analyses, I look at the average marginal component effect. Figure 1 shows the AMCEs for the meeting question, depicting the effect of the attributes self-reported engagement. We can interpret the AMCEs for each attribute level as how much more or less likely an individual was to pick an organization with that level relative to the baseline category.³ For each attribute, the most local level was chosen as the baseline category. My expectations translate into negative coefficients for other levels within each attribute.

Overall results support the hypothesis that the localness of an organization matters for engagement. When it comes to geographic localness, an organization founded in the

³AMCEs measures direction and intensity of preferences simultaneously, so these can not be interpreted as estimates of population preferences.

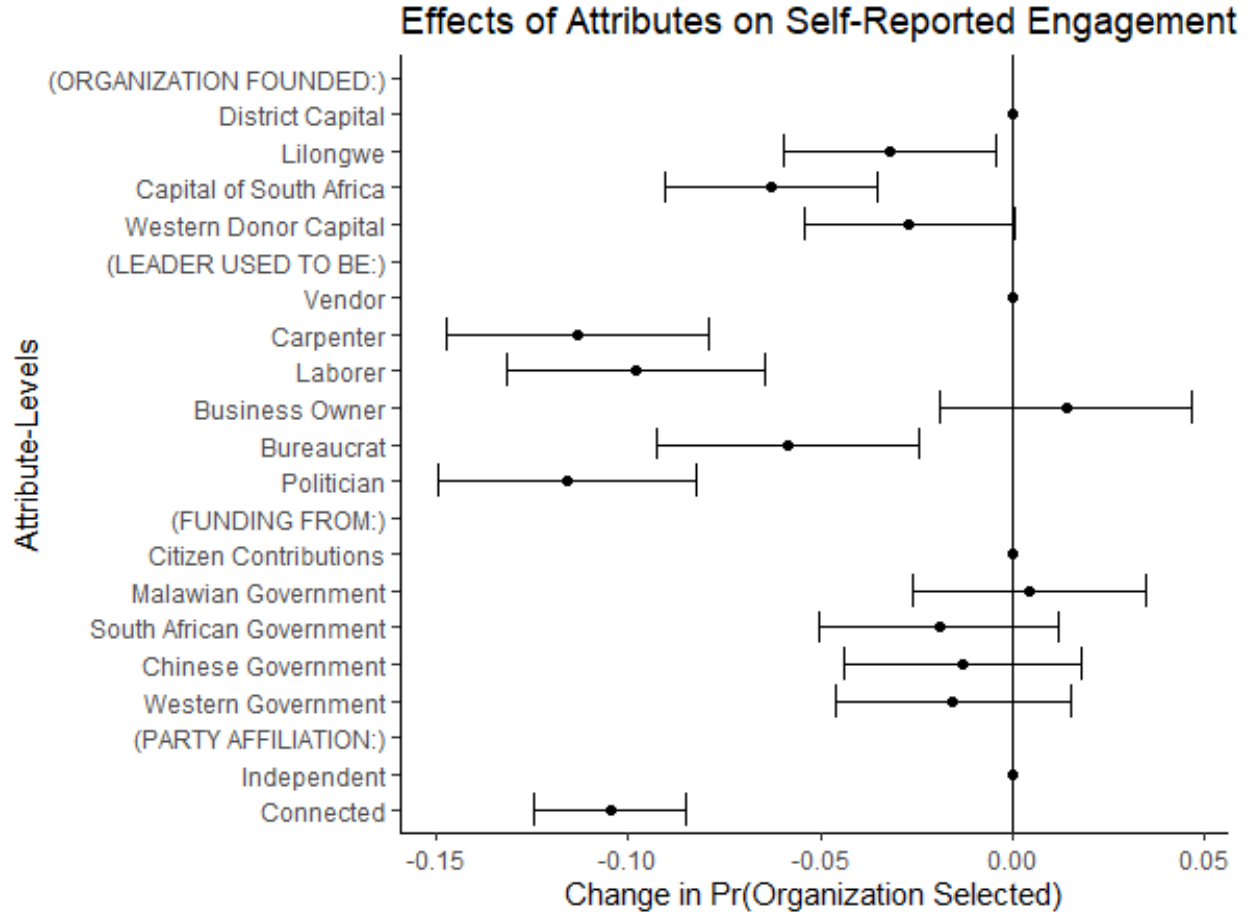


Figure 1: AMCE Plot for Meeting Question. Each AMCE represents the change in the probability of deciding to attend an organization's meeting when going from a certain level in each attribute to the baseline for that attribute, when faced by a random other profile. Model 1 from Table 2 in Appendix C was used for this plot. Dots without error bars represent the baseline level for that attribute. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

respondent's district capital elicited stronger responses from respondents than organizations founded in Lilongwe (the capital of Malawi) and the capital of South Africa, although it could only be distinguished from an organization founded in the district capital at the 0.1 level. the AMCEs for this attribute indicate that the place where an organization was founded was relevant to respondents when they considered how likely they are to want to engage with it, underscoring the importance of geographic localness.

Demographic localness also mattered to respondents. Organizations led by a former vendor or a former business owner were more likely to be selected by respondents. It was

not possible to distinguish statistically between the probability of being picked for these two categories. However, given that vendors, who sell goods or services in a market, could view themselves as business owners, or at least as business people, this still supports the theory that vendors favor organizations that are led by individuals with whom they can identify. The lack of a statistically significant difference between these two professions is a hopeful finding, as it suggests that demographic localness can be more expansive. Organizations looking to engage a certain population may not have to reflect it exactly as long as they reflect it in broader way. At the same time, this finding emphasizes that individuals are more willing to engage with an organization that reflects them in some way — even, crucially, when that organization’s *goals* have little to do with that identity itself.

Resource-based localness was not important to respondents. Surprisingly, there was no distinguishable difference between the baseline and the other levels when it came to the source of an organization’s funding. Once we account for other organizational attributes, it seems, where an organization’s money comes from does not matter. In the development context, this is an important finding and fits with previous findings that the source of funding may not matter as much to individuals, with local connections being more significant factors — as the rest of the results suggest (Cammett and MacLean, 2014). This null result is noteworthy, however, because it shows that Malawian vendors do not seem to show preference for organizations that receive funding from the West over ones that receive support from China. Given the fact that China has begun to invest heavily in Africa—including in Malawi—this could present a problem for aid organizations that work primarily with the West and that attempt to use those ties to elevate their status. Nevertheless, funding may turn out to be more important in the West or in countries where a government is actively disparaging of donor aid.

Finally, political localness was a concern for respondents. Respondents were much more likely to choose an organization that was independent of all parties versus one that was connected to a political party. This makes sense given the divided nature of Malawian

politics combined with the substantive focus of the hypothetical organization — free and fair elections. It also hints that Malawian market vendors do not think highly of political parties in general. The size of the effect is also noticeable, and the confidence bands for both point estimates show that this is the most tightly estimated effect.

Discussion

The results of this analysis underscore that organizational attributes matter when people think about engaging with an organization. Crucially, individuals consistently chose organizations with attributes that signal localness. The results therefore support the theory laid out above: individuals factor the localness of an organization into the calculus of their engagement decision.

The support for more local organizations could be seen as puzzling, as other studies have found that Western organizations are generally popular in developing countries (Guarrieri, 2018). This may help explain the effect of a Western donor capital in the geographic localness attribute. A possible cause could be that individuals may be more likely to engage with more local organizations, but also think that local organizations will be of lower quality versus Western organizations or that Western organizations may have more resources at their disposal. The latter concern is mitigated by the design; all hypothetical organizations had the same budget. As a test of the former, I used a second outcome question, which asked which organization respondents thought would be more likely to have a scandal in Malawi (this question was asked after the meeting question; see App. A for full question text). The results (see App. C) are largely the same as for the meeting question, however. Geographically, respondents were statistically indifferent between Western donor capital founded organizations and organizations founded in their district capital. This suggests that individuals do still think that their local organizations will be of high quality. In general, more work needs to be done separating out preferences for local organizations from *expectations* for Western organizations.

The nature of the sample invites questions of external validity. Yet, the homogeneity of

the sample facilitates the experimental design. I was able to estimate the effect of demographic localness because all respondents were vendors at a market. Similarly, the political climate in Malawi made it unnecessary to specify a certain political party to test political localness. While the sample was drawn from a small, but important, sub-population, there is little cause to believe that localness would not matter for the population at large nor that the findings would be limited to CSOs in developing countries. On a theoretical level, the fact that individuals prefer the familiar is not a phenomenon exclusive to the developing world; Alinsky (1989[1971]) suggested that political organizers in the United States going into communities needed to look and act like members of those communities.

Subgroup analysis by community organization involvement and beliefs about the role of NGOs showed no heterogeneous effects (see App. D). The lack of heterogeneity suggests that the results here generalize and that the outcome question captures important broader attitudes; the results are not driven entirely by individuals who have experience with CSOs or think they can serve as important intermediaries. There was also no strong evidence of any consistent interaction effects (see App. E). The findings are robust to adding enumerator and market fixed effects, using logistic regression, and running results separately for the first and second pair (see App. F).

Conclusion

The localness of an organization matters to individuals. Respondents were more likely to declare a willingness to attend a meeting of an organization with traits that indicated that it may reflect them and their interests. The results therefore support the idea that individuals gain greater utility from interacting with organizations that are more local.

Some of the results carry with them concrete implications for less developed countries in particular. The findings associated with the political party and the leader's former profession attributes imply that politicians and political parties that try to claim credit for work done by aid organizations may undermine the work that organizations do vis a vis citizens, by making them disengage from these organizations. Vendors' greater openness to demographically

and geographically local organizations, combined with the null effect of funding source, suggests that donors need to reevaluate their intervention strategies. If they pressure local organizations in a way that makes them less local – as some evidence suggests is the case (Chaplowe and Engo-Tjéga, 2007) – their efforts can backfire.

While this work has established that individuals pay attention to organizational attributes, more work needs to be done to explore the causal mechanisms of this finding. Does localness serve as a proxy for a more well-defined identity group, and is identity then the most important factor to explaining when an individual decides to engage with an organization? To what extent does how close an individual feels to an organization affect that decision? In general, follow-up work needs to investigate why individuals may hold such attitudes. The effects may be conditional on the civil society sector of the organization—after all, the hypothetical organization in this case was an organization active in trying to ensure free and fair elections—or on the party affiliation of both the individual and the politician, and so further work needs to probe these findings in greater detail.

We know that providing citizens with information alone is ineffective for motivating collective action. Therefore, we need to do more research into the role CSOs as both vehicles for information and as aggregators of informed citizens preferences. CSOs can play an important role in inciting collective action, and finding out when they can do so more effectively is important in terms of activism and academics. The results of this study highlight the role that organizational attributes can play when it comes to how well an organization might be able to mobilize individuals for collective action. As we seek to find out more about when, why, and how individuals and organizations interact, we will need to continue down this path of study.

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