

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

Simon Hoellerbauer\*

July 29, 2020

## Abstract

Civil society organizations (CSOs) can serve as vehicles and instigators of collective action. This makes understanding engagement with CSOs critical to the study of the collective action problem. When are organizations better able to engage individuals? Do organizations that seem more “local” to individuals elicit more engagement? In this study, I use a conjoint survey experiment to test how organizational attributes that signal localness to respondents influence respondents’ willingness to attend a hypothetical organization’s meetings. I find strong support that individuals are more likely to choose organizations that are more local in nature. This finding has wide implications for the study of organizations, the study of collective action, and their intersection.

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\*PhD Candidate, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Email: [hoellers@unc.edu](mailto:hoellers@unc.edu)

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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 (Grossman, 2014; Gugerty and Kremer, 2008). 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 helped reframe the question of why individuals engage with organizations, we still know relatively little about when organizations will effectively engage individuals. In this paper, I contribute to this literature by developing and 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. There are different types of *localness* that may be important, including geographic, resource-based, demographic, and political *localness*, the four on which I focus in this study. A geographically local organization is one that is located close to an individual, either in founding or in terms of headquarters. 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. A demographically local organization is made up of members who are similar to the individual considering engaging with it. Finally,

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a politically local organization is one that matches the political demands and affiliations of the individual.

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; we know that material benefits sometimes fail to explain why individuals join an organization, and collective or social benefits can do a much better job (McAdam, 1986). 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.

I argue that 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. 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.

I use a conjoint survey experiment conducted in Malawi to test how different organizational attributes impact individuals' evaluations of a hypothetical civil society organization. The strength of the conjoint is that it allows me to test different potential cues for localness. 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. In the developing world, aid to organizations has led to changes in their structure and makeup, making them less local (Murdie, 2014). As such, the experimental findings presented here show that aid to organizations in the developing world can backfire, undermining donors' goals. These results have a broader

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application as well, however; the results presented here underscore that organizations that fail to reflect their constituencies may struggle to mobilize them effectively, and therefore may impair citizens’ ability to hold their governments accountable across the world.

## **Experimental Design**

I use a forced-choice conjoint survey experiment to test how selected characteristics of an organization influence individuals’ evaluation of and desire to interact with that organization.<sup>1</sup> 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 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. Malawi is also a suitable context for this study; there are lots of NGOs active in the country, both local and foreign, donor-organized and -led. Malawi has a relatively competitive electoral system, and there is a concrete demand for citizen 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. 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, at least at an introductory level.

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<sup>1</sup> This study was pre-registered with EGAP, ID: 20190201AA. Please see Appendix B for a discussion of changes made to the analysis.

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<b><i>Type of Localness - Attribute</i></b>	<b>Levels:</b>
<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

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 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. Malawians in general have a negative opinion of the political system. 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

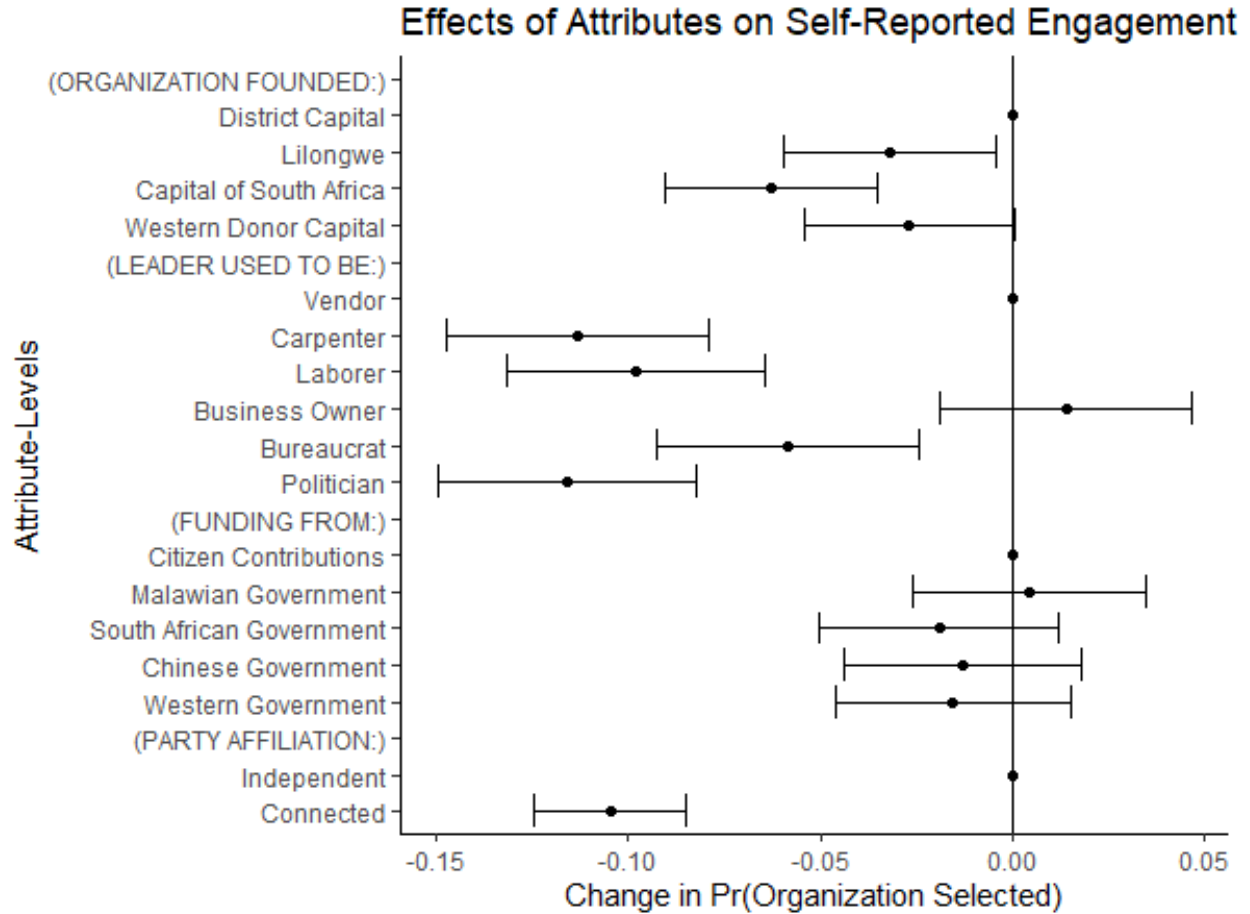


Figure 1: AMCE Plot for Meeting Question. Each AMCE represents the change in the probability of deciding to attend an organization's meeting when going from a certain level in each attribute to the baseline for that attribute, when faced by a random other profile. Model 1 from Table 2 in Appendix C was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

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 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

<sup>2</sup> AMCEs measures direction and intensity of preferences simultaneously, so these can not be interpreted as estimates of population preferences.

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only be distinguished from an organization founded in the district capital at the .1 level. the AMCEs for this attribute indicate that the place where an organization was founded was clearly 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 clearly mattered to respondent. 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 statistical 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 a more broadly construed 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 seemingly 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 interesting, however, in particular 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

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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 tense and divided nature of Malawian politics, and indicates that Malawian market vendors do not think very 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 in general.

## **Discussion**

The results of this analysis underscore that organizational attributes matter to individuals when they think about engaging with an organization. Crucially, individuals consistently support 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 partially 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



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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.

Given the nature of the sample, questions of external validity are warranted. Yet, the homogeneity of the sample facilitates the experimental design. I was able to estimate cleanly the effect of demographic localness because all respondents were vendors at a market. Similarly, the political climate in Malawi meant that I did not have to specify a certain political party to test political localness. Some of the results do 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. Of course, this effect 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.

At the same time, there is no reason to expect that the fact that localness matters to people whom an organization would like to mobilize would be limited to civil society organizations 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.

Pre-specified subgroup analysis by community organization involvement and beliefs about the role of NGOs showed no heterogeneous effects (see App. D). There was also no strong evidence of any consistent interaction effects for either outcome (see App. E). The findings robust to adding enumerator and market fixed effects, using logistic regression, and running

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results separately for the first and second pair (see App. F).

## Conclusion

The localness of an organization clearly 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, and were less likely to think such an organization would be involved with a scandal. The results therefore support the idea that individuals gain greater utility from interacting with organizations that are more local. While this work has established that individuals pay attention to organizational attributes, more work needs to be done to explore the causal mechanisms and the implications of this finding. Is identity 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 (which may not necessarily be due to identity) affect that decision? In general, follow-up work needs to investigate why individuals may hold such attitudes.

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. Civil society organizations 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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