

# Organizing for Education: A Cross-National, Longitudinal Study of Civil Society Organizations and Education Outcomes

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**Abstract** We address two views from organization theory to consider the expansion and effects of nonprofits in education: first, a functional view emphasizing the direct effect of work of civil society organizations (CSOs) and, second, a phenomenological neoinstitutional view focusing on the cultural meaning of education CSOs as indicators of a rationalized, liberal world society. We use panel regression models with country fixed effects to analyze the cross-national expansion of domestic education CSO sectors in 130 countries from 1970 to 2014. We then examine the association between the size of the domestic education CSO sector and memberships in international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) with education outcomes, including spending, education aid, secondary and tertiary enrollments, and the share of women in secondary and tertiary education. Results show that INGO memberships, an expanded state, and an expanded education system are highly associated with the expansion of a domestic education CSO sector. Both domestic CSOs and INGO memberships tend to have a significant, positive relationship with education outcomes net of other factors. We also find preliminary evidence indicating that the causal forces at play are more complex than a straightforward direct effect of education CSOs doing good work. Specifically, CSOs, at least in part, are indicators of a Western, liberal model of a proper modern society; the underpinning

culture, represented by CSOs, accounts for some educational expansion above and beyond the benefit (or harm) caused by any given entity.

**Keywords** Education · Institutional theory · Nonprofits · Civil society organizations

We are in the midst of a “global associational revolution” (Salamon 1993). Civil society organizations (CSOs) have expanded massively around the globe. It is often taken as a matter of faith that a growing CSO sector will produce a wide array of benefits for society, but empirical studies are rare, in part due to lack of systematic data. In this paper we address the fundamental question of the relationship between historical growth of CSOs and a set of relevant societal outcomes. We focus our efforts on the education sector, using a unique cross-national, longitudinal dataset to consider the impact of both international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and domestic CSOs.<sup>1</sup>

We proceed in two stages. First, we examine factors leading to a cross-national expansion of the domestic education CSO sector. As part of a global associational revolution, the education CSO sector is rapidly growing in most countries around the globe. We show that this growth is driven in part by linkages to global cultural models, or

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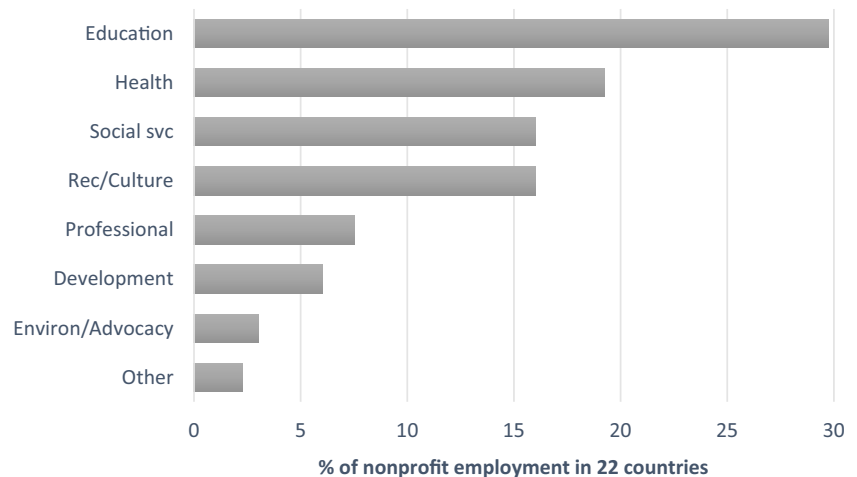
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<sup>1</sup> We use the term “civil society organization (CSO)” to refer to domestic organizations in part because alternatives such as “non-government organization (NGO)” or “non-profit/not-for-profit organization” sometimes connote, respectively, international work or US-based organizations. We also avoid the term “association” because our sample includes only entities that are identified as formal organizations, versus looser forms of voluntary life. At the global level, we use the term “international non-governmental organization (INGO)” to be consistent with the dominant term in prior research in this area (e.g., Boli and Thomas, 1997, 1999). We provide more information on specific definitions in “data and methods” section.

**Fig. 1** Percent of nonprofit sector employment in 22 countries. *Source:* adapted from Salamon et al. 1999: 17



what sociologists have referred to as “world culture” (Meyer et al. 1997). Second, we consider whether the development (or in some cases emergence) of an education CSO sector has consequences for key educational outcomes such as funding and enrollments. Overall, our study empirically examines core assumptions about why CSOs exist and what they do in society.

CSOs, particularly those operating in service provision fields like education, are simultaneously celebrated as a solution to the failures of government and market, and yet frequently critiqued as being unprofessional, inept, or even corrupt. Our analyses show an expanded CSO sector is significantly associated with desirable education outcomes, but we also find preliminary evidence indicating that the causal forces at play are more complex than a straightforward direct effect of education CSOs doing good work. CSOs, at least in part, are indicators of a Western, liberal model of a proper modern society; the underpinning culture accounts for some educational expansion above and beyond the benefit (or harm) caused by any given CSO.

Worldwide, evidence suggests civil society is growing in multiple dimensions. At the transnational level, the number of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) has grown exponentially, from 176 entities in 1909 (the first year systematic data are available) to more than 60,000 in 2016 (Union of International Associations 2016). Within countries, researchers at Johns Hopkins found increases in nonprofit employment, volunteering, and individual memberships between 1990 and 1995 across the seven countries for which they collected comparable data (Hungary, Japan, Sweden, Germany, the UK, France, and the USA) (Anheier and Salamon 2006). Also focusing on domestic CSOs, Schofer and Longhofer (2011) show the percent change in the number of CSOs per capita between 1991 and 2006 is upward of 25% in most of the developed world, and exceeds 100% in parts of Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa.

Within this overall growth, education is one of the largest domains of nonprofit activity. In the most comprehensive study of its kind, Salamon et al. (1999) survey 22 countries from five continents, taking stock of the size and scope of the CSO sector. They find the education sector makes up between 18 and 44 percent of the voluntary sector, on average outpacing every other type of nonprofit employment (see Fig. 1) (Salamon et al. 1999: 20). In addition to being one of the largest segments of a rapidly growing global associational sector, education is key because, worldwide, it is thought to provide a main vehicle for equality and mobility. Education is one of the few social services enshrined as a fundamental human right and guaranteed through compulsory schooling laws around the world (Meyer et al. 2010).

We consider evidence surrounding two conceptions of how nonprofit organizations are linked to formal education. First, many studies emphasize the direct activities of CSO work, which we term a “functional” view. An optimistic vision argues that CSOs positively influence society directly through concrete actions such as lobbying, monitoring government, innovating, or providing services (Frumkin 2002). This positive view largely follows Putnam’s general conception of associational life as tied to social capital, providing collective goods through direct, face-to-face action (Putnam et al. 1994; Putnam 1995, 2001; Putnam and Campbell 2012). Social capital, as classically defined by Coleman, exists through direct relationships between actors: “Unlike other forms of capital, social capital inheres in the relations between actors and among actors” (1988: 98). These relations form networks through which expectations are conveyed, information can flow, and norms can be enforced, enabling social capital to take on its productive value. The functional perspective focuses on relatively bottom-up organizing, where CSOs provide services to benefit society and/or act as interest groups to make demands on government. The

relationship between civil society and democratic government is symbiotic. As a political function, more social capital creates more CSOs that balance state power (Gellner 1996).<sup>2</sup>

Within the functional framework, a critical alternative depicts CSOs as inconsequential, inept, or even corrupt (Gibbelman and Gelman 2004). These arguments follow the assumption of face-to-face, relational underpinnings in the social capital theory of civil society, but call into question the positive benefits (Portes 2014). As Fukuyama describes, “One person’s civic engagement is another’s rent-seeking; much of what constitutes civil society can be described as interest groups trying to divert public resources to their favoured causes...There is no guarantee that self-styled public interest NGOs represent real public interests. It is entirely possible that too active an NGO sector may represent an excessive politicization of public life, which can either distort public policy or lead to deadlock” (2001: 12). CSOs can be, and sometimes are, vehicles to pursue narrow private interests, and even to perpetrate fraud and other criminal activity.

By contrast, a constructivist view of CSOs, fitting the framework of sociological neoinstitutionalism or world culture theory, envisions these entities, especially international ones, as reflections and carriers of contemporary global discourses that assert socioeconomic progress should be pursued through individual and organizational action (Meyer et al. 1997). In this approach, civil society organization is correlated with related societal features, like an expanded education system, due to the shared cultural frames underpinning such rationalized social structures. The world culture view is agnostic about systematic direct effects of domestic education CSOs, instead arguing that the concrete actions of any given entity can be beneficial, harmful, or inconsequential. In this perspective, the expansion of education CSOs is part of a general trend of massive societal re-organization around a global cultural model that places education front and center.

These two general views of CSOs yield different arguments about the relationship between education CSOs and other education outcomes. A first set of arguments considers the functional and constructivist reasons why education CSOs expand. We consider why they proliferate across countries despite massive core differences in economic development or democratic governance. A second set of propositions considers the expected functional and constructivist relationship between education CSOs on

several education outcomes, such as enrollment and funding for the education sector.

### CSOs-as-Function

The optimistic functional view sees CSOs as an integral part of democratic society, serving to strengthen democratic governance and political socialization by acting as service providers, connecting individuals within communities, lobbying the government, and so on. A thriving democracy, economic development, and a strong civil society—the pillars of a three-sector nation-state—are assumed to work hand-in-hand. The answer to why CSOs expand is rooted in national society, arising from the aggregated capabilities of citizens to fill their needs and interests (Almond and Verba 1963), and due to wider societal development and modernization (Inkeles and Smith 1970). For example, industrialization is thought to bring education and affluence, which supports a vibrant private, voluntary sector (Inglehart 1997; Inglehart and Baker 2000; Verba et al. 1995). Similarly, liberal democracy is often linked to the expansion of civil society, allowing and encouraging the expansion of CSOs (e.g., Skocpol and Fiorina 2004). Almost by definition, a feature of non-democratic societies is suppression of free association and, thus, CSOs. And, in part by virtue of their freedom to associate, these empowered individual citizens are assumed to collaborate to fill social needs that the market or government fails to provide through CSOs. These arguments straightforwardly lead to the following proposition for explaining the size of domestic CSO sectors:

**Hypothesis 1a** Functional Expansion: The education CSO sector will be larger in wealthier and more democratic countries.

If the expanding numbers of education CSOs are achieving their goals—as a positive functional view assumes—we would expect countries with a more developed education sector to have more desirable education outcomes, such as spending more on education or having more children enrolled in school. A direct positive effect of charitable activity in education could occur through several paths. First, CSOs can be important service providers. Historically, charities and missions were some of the oldest providers of education, spreading schools throughout the world (White 1996; Gallego and Woodberry 2010). In the contemporary period, secular privatization and contracting is commonplace; at the extreme end, some governments now have formal “compacts” with CSOs delineating the scope of work performed by each party (Reuter et al. 2012). Second, and more recently, international

<sup>2</sup> Social capital is presumed to generate other positive externalities as well, such as trust and increased citizenship skills, leading to benefits such as decreased crime, decreased political corruption, increased volunteering, and even better health (Coleman 1988; Kawachi 1999).

educational development nonprofits also increasingly engage in more scientific activities such as research, evaluation, monitoring, and awareness raising (Bromley 2010). Last, social movement activities and CSOs may play a role in shaping related political outcomes (Soule and Olzak 2004). In the USA, philanthropic organizations have come to play a central role in shaping education policies (Reckhow 2012; Reckhow and Snyder 2014) and may push for improvements in access or quality.

It is not obvious, however, that we should expect CSOs to consistently achieve their lofty missions; as Maier and Meyer (2011) note, the discourse of how civil society should work is not necessarily the same as how it does work. In developing countries, CSOs and INGOs have come under a great deal of criticism in recent years for being, at best, inept and mismanaged and, at worst, sources of corruption. For example, a study of Ugandan CSOs found that substantial indications of financial misrepresentation (Burger and Owens 2010), and anecdotes of “briefcase NGOs” (fraudulent groups that receive funding but never offer programs or services) are commonplace (e.g., Lee 2014; Lentfer 2014). One global nonprofit leader has gone so far as to proclaim “the end of blind faith” in CSOs (Naidoo 2004). Nonprofits come under fire in developed countries too. Brody, a US scholar, stated: “The nonprofit sector’s claims to exist for the public good are no longer being taken on faith, and more people believe they have a stake in the accountability of nonprofits” (2002: 472). The United Way, The Nature Conservancy, and the Red Cross, among others, have all experienced high profile scandals (Christensen 2004; Gugerty 2009). Overall, many studies now highlight declining public trust in nonprofits in the USA (e.g., Salamon 2002; Fremont-Smith and Kosaras 2003; Greenlee et al. 2007; Light 2004) and internationally (Gibbelman and Gelman 2004). In some countries, the nonprofit sector is now less trusted than government or business (Edelman Trust 2007). Thus, the benign view of education CSOs as doing good may be overly naïve.

A growing focus on accountability also leads to criticism, not on grounds of corruption, but on grounds of failing to achieve outcomes despite a good-faith effort. Critiques on the grounds of wasting resources may be exacerbated in the domain of education because outcomes are notoriously difficult to achieve; large-scale change requires structural intervention and confidence in how to measure success, both of which are highly contentious and ambiguous. Recently, for example, both the Gates Foundation and Mark Zuckerberg have been widely criticized for failures of their programs in US public schools (Tompkins-Stange 2016) and foundation influence over

education policy is increasingly controversial (Reckhow 2012).

Despite a growing chorus criticizing CSOs, the stated goal of many of these groups is to improve education in a variety of ways, and conventional social capital arguments have many adherents. This conventional view argues that CSOs expand because of the positive benefits they bring, and these are expected to be most prevalent when there is appropriate capability and need. We formally test whether there is evidence of social capital arguments by considering the association between size of the domestic CSO sector and a range of positive education outcomes, including government expenditures, levels of aid received, and enrollments. Stated formally,

**Hypothesis 2a** Functional Effects: An expanded education CSO sector will have a positive effect on desired education outcomes.

### CSOs-as-Culture

A world culture vision of CSOs focuses less on what any individual entity does (or fails to do), and more on the cultural elements that underpin the global expansion of organization and education. In this view, world culture is a powerful driver of expanding formal organization worldwide, including the structures of nation-states, education systems, and domestic CSO sectors (Bromley and Meyer 2015).

World culture refers to a set of ideas and discourses, such as Western visions of individualism, progress, and justice, that became enshrined in international institutions in the wake of World War II and propagated globally (Meyer et al. 1997). In this cultural framework, individuals are the fundamental unit, and they are increasingly sacred and empowered (Elliott 2007). “Organizations” are the social structures that emerge from a now-globalized vision of individuals as educable, equal, and rights-bearing (Bromley and Meyer 2015). Worldwide, organizations expand in number, domains, and formal complexity, and empowered individuals are both the targets and builders of these social structures. Multiple forms of expanded organizing stem from the underlying sacred, empowered cultural status of persons. For example, especially since the 1990s, a global “pro-NGO” norm developed in the international community, creating global roots for the development of domestic CSO sectors (Reimann 2006). As organization becomes the dominant form of social structure, all sorts of entities, including nation-states, education systems, and civil society, become increasingly (re)structured as formal organizations (Bromley and Meyer 2017).

In short, we argue that the expansion of liberal world culture drives the expansion of domestic CSOs and consider three institutional manifestations of this cultural foundation. Specifically, world culture is embedded and transmitted via three forces described below—international organizations (Boli and Thomas 1999), the modern nation-state (itself a creature of world society; see Meyer et al. 1997), and education (Schofer and Meyer 2005). Ultimately, we suggest that education CSOs are creatures of this cultural system, and operate as extensions of it.

First, in earlier work, Schofer and Longhofer (2011) show that ties to world culture, as measured by the standard indicator of memberships in INGOs, are key drivers in the formation of domestic CSOs. CSO growth is especially strong in countries that did not already have a well-organized civil society, such as newly independent countries that emerged after the breakup of the Soviet Union and developing countries that participated in international development projects requiring the participation of civil society in their implementation.

Second, the expanding modern state, which is largely constituted by world cultural principles, plays a role in the development of CSO sectors. World culture favors the expansion of organization, which can be measured by the size of the state. In part, countries with expanded governments are more organized ones, and thus society is also likely to be more organized, with both trends driven by world culture. In addition, the former intensifies the latter: Organized and expanded states create structural opportunities and even requirements for societal organization. In this view, domestic education CSOs are part of a broader process of rationalization that reflects liberal world cultural principles. Over and above wealth and political democracy, the size of the nation-state is expected to have a positive association with the size of the domestic CSO sector. Our argument stands in direct contrast with functional arguments that a large state “crowds out” CSOs (Joyce and Schambra 1996). The theory is that CSOs fill gaps left by government and market failures to provide for citizens (Weisbrod 1978). By this argument, at the national level the growth of nonprofit organizations around the world is linked to a declining legitimacy and capability of the state to provide for its citizens. Worldwide, social welfare policies are increasingly called into question by the logics of market provision, competition, and choice; state-led development has stagnated or collapsed in many places (e.g., the experiment of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe). The argument that a weak or shrinking state leaves gaps that CSOs expand to fill, or that decentralization and privatization of government services leads to more efficient and effective private welfare programs, is common in conservative American discourse.

Third, educational expansion is central to world culture, and a key conduit for the spread of global cultural models; thus, education expansion should lead to increased organizing. Education is seen as the central path for investing in, and developing, highly capable, autonomous, and rational individuals that form the basis of modern world culture. As individualist liberal cultural assumptions are globalized, education expands worldwide. For instance, in a seminal study, Meyer et al. (1992) show a global expansion of mass education over the period 1870–1980, driven substantially by the globalization of liberal cultural values that celebrate education (for primary education, see also Benavot and Riddle 1988). Subsequently, scholars have shown the importance of world culture for driving expansions in higher education (Schofer and Meyer 2005; Frank and Meyer 2007) and early childhood education (Wotipka et al. 2017).

Mass education, itself a reflection of embeddedness in liberal cultural values, has also long been recognized as central to social and economic development (see Hannum and Buchmann 2003 for an overview) and civic integration (Almond and Verba 1963). At lower levels, education socializes people for participation in the universalistic roles of modern political, social, and economic organizations—indeed, the basic early modern theory of organizations presupposed a population of schooled people, as Stinchcombe emphasized (1965). At higher levels, it provides the purposeful individual actors that are the building blocks of organization (Bromley and Meyer 2015). As others have noted, the theory and practice of modern organizational life is mainly about the orientations and behavior of these highly schooled participants (Drori et al. 2014). Schooled persons become endowed with the authority and capability to organize around multitudes of issues including, for instance, forming CSOs to protect the rights of children or advocate for gender equality in education. There is a mutually reinforcing relationship between the organizational structures that are constructed by empowered individuals, and the education required to construct the individuals.

One can find countless examples of civic organization at all levels of the global education system; for example, Paragraph 8 of UNESCO’s 2000 Dakar Framework for Action, which established the massive Education for All movement, affirmed the importance of “engagement and participation of civil society in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of strategies for educational development.” We suggest both UNESCO’s Education for All campaign itself and its engagement with civil society stem from a liberal world culture in which education is seen as the means through which people become transformed into responsible citizens, employees, managers, and consumers. The answers to most social problems, from

failures of democracy to lack of social cohesion to health problems to economic productivity, tend to include education. In this view, CSOs reflect the spread of a rationalized global culture (Schofer and Longhofer 2011), and education CSOs help re-organize society around the assumptions of contemporary world culture. Overall, the expansion of education is likely to increase the rate at which organizations form and expand.

**Hypothesis 1b** World Culture Expansion: The education CSO sector will be larger in countries more linked to world culture via INGO memberships, expanded governments, and expanded education systems.

A traditional focus of world culture research emphasized the vast decoupling that could occur between formal structures and goals, and on-the-ground activities (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Meyer et al. 1997). The world culture view often conceptualizes both domestic CSOs and INGOs as, at least in part, the structural embodiment of a Western, liberal culture that promotes rational, individual action. This structure-as-culture view does not presume the organizations are effective, as is the case under social capital assumptions. The cultural rationale for organizing assumes there will often be a great deal of decoupling between individual goals (either in the public interest or narrowly self-serving) and actual outcomes. CSOs are not self-evident, logical, natural solutions to collective action problems, but rather social constructions prescribed by cultural norms. Some may be effective, while others may be corrupt and ineffective. This line of argument helps explain the rapid growth of CSOs even in the face of uncertain or mixed evidence about their effectiveness. In this line of thought, as education CSOs are mainly embodiments of a cultural frame, there is no reason to expect them to be achieving their goals, and thus no reason to expect improved education outcomes.

We depart from this standard view, drawing on recent arguments and evidence in organizational sociology that suggest that under certain conditions decoupling may be difficult to sustain. For example, a growing body of research supports the argument that, over time, ceremonial efforts often become binding. For example, Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui (2005: 1378) report that when “nation-states make formal legal commitments to symbolize human rights compliance even while they are in violation, this process of ‘empty’ institutional commitment to a weak regime paradoxically empowers non-state advocates with the tools to pressure governments toward compliance”. In a study of environmental policies and outcomes, Schofer and Hironaka (2005) show that domestic environmental outcomes improve as support and mobilization for the environment becomes more institutionalized at the world level. And in a related vein, Cole (2012) shows that countries may

experience an apparent initial widening of the discrepancy between human rights practices and policies due to increased reporting and monitoring (rather than an actual increase in violations), but this is followed by gradual alignment. At the most extreme, some organizational scholars conclude that decoupling is only a temporary phenomenon (Boxenbaum and Jonsson 2008; Haack et al. 2012).

There are two possible paths through which cultural influences might support positive organizational effects. First, organizations’ external environment has changed substantially as we move toward becoming a global “audit culture” or “audit society” (Power 1997; Strathern 2000). There is a growing emphasis on accountability, transparency, and monitoring leading to growing pressure on organizations to align their policies and practices (Bromley and Powell 2012). As a result, education CSOs may be increasingly pressured to achieve their goals. Second, the effects of world culture linkage on educational outcomes may operate indirectly. A small proportion of INGOs focus on education or children, and research shows that sector-specific organizations can play a direct role in institutionalizing world cultural expectations that mass schooling is compulsory for all (Schafer 1999; Mundy and Murphy 2001; Kim and Boyle 2012). But the vast majority of INGOs are professional or trade-related groups with no direct involvement in mass education, lending support to the more diffuse cultural explanation for their association with schooling (Boli and Thomas 1999). These organizations are more indicators of an underlying cultural frame that valorizes education, than direct actors in the education domain. In this account, the overall story is one of drift of multiple institutional manifestations of a shared world culture (i.e., INGO memberships, state expansion, education system expansion, education CSOs, and education outcomes) in the same direction over a long period of time, rather than the direct causal effects of specific organizations as in a functional depiction.

As an empirical matter, studies have not yet examined whether the well-documented association between INGOs and education continues to exist above and beyond the size of the domestic CSO sector, across different types of countries, and for different types of education outcomes. If INGO memberships are linked to expanded domestic education CSO sectors, as we posit above, then it is plausible that domestic CSOs are the main mechanism through which education outcomes are improved. In this scenario, INGO memberships would not have an independent association with education outcomes. Instead, their role would be in promoting the expansion of a domestic sector, which explains positive education outcomes. Thus, there is reason to suspect linkage to world culture may weaken once controlling for the size of the domestic CSO sector,

although we posit both domestic and international organizing is tied to improved education outcomes. In short, we argue that embeddedness in world culture via organizational indicators will be associated with improved education outcomes:

**Hypothesis 2b** World Culture Domestic CSO Effects: Countries with a larger domestic education CSO sector will have improved education outcomes.

**Hypothesis 2c** World Culture INGO Effects: Countries with a larger number of INGO memberships will have improved education outcomes.

In sum, we see the expansion of organization as a cultural indicator of Western liberalism. This cultural system relies on rational, empowered individuals to be the engines of economic, political, and social life, and the way they are thought to gain the necessary skills to participate properly is through education. Globalized liberal culture, indicated by domestic CSOs and INGOs, propels educational expansion and improvement.

## Data and Methods

To consider these different depictions of the sources and effects of CSOs, we use panel regression models with country fixed effects on a sample of more than 130 countries over the period 1970–2014. For analyses that focus specifically on foreign aid, we exclude highly developed nations leaving a sample of 110 countries. In Table 1, we provide an overview of the hypotheses and associated indicators.

Our core variables are:

**Domestic education CSOs** Data on the number of domestic education CSOs in a given country come from the Gale Group's *Associations Unlimited* database, which contains information on more than 30,000 domestic CSOs around the world (Gale 2010). We used Gale's keywords to identify groups that had an education focus, excluding organizations that were branches of INGOs. These entities are formal organizations and information contains, for example, the names of directors, executive officers, or other personal contacts; telephone, fax, telex, electronic mail, Web sites, and bulletin boards; the group's history, governance, staff, membership, budget, and affiliations; the goals and activities of the international organization, including research, awards, certification, education, lobbying, and other important activities; and publication and convention information (Gale Group Website 2017). Organizational founding dates were used to estimate the number in existence in prior years. The measure reflects the cumulative count of domestic education CSOs previously

founded (logged to address skewness). We discuss some limitations of this measure, below. Also see Schofer and Longhofer (2011) for a detailed discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of this dataset.

**INGO memberships** Following sociological convention, INGO memberships indicate a country's linkage to world culture (Boli and Thomas 1999). This measure is constructed using data on INGO memberships from the *Yearbook of International Associations* (UIA 2017); it counts the total number of different INGOs that a country's citizens hold membership in, logged to reduce skewness. In this data source, NGOs are defined as: "A non-governmental organization (NGO) is a legally constituted organization created by private persons or organizations without participation or representation of any government. The term originated from the United Nations, and is usually used to refer to organizations that are not conventional for-profit business. NGOs can be organized on a local, national or international level" (UIA Website 2017).

**Secondary enrollment** A central interest is the expansion of participation in education, which can be measured by the gross enrollment ratio, taken from the World Development Indicators (World Bank World Bank 2014). We include this measure as an indicator of embeddedness in liberal world cultural culture for models predicting the expansion of education CSOs, as an outcome for models examining the association between organizing and enrollment, and as a control for models predicting outcomes other than secondary enrollment.

**Tertiary enrollment.** To further consider the expansion of education, at the tertiary level we measure this by a country's gross tertiary enrollment ratio. The measure includes students enrolled in ISCED levels 5 and 6, which correspond to conventional understandings of higher education (World Bank 2014).<sup>3</sup>

**Women in secondary and tertiary** As a measure of gender equality in the education system, we consider women's share of education at secondary and tertiary levels, taken from the World Development Indicators (World Bank 2014).

**Education aid** We include a measure of education-related international aid. Data come from Aid Data, a project-level database of bilateral and multilateral aid currently being coded by activity by the Aid Data researchers (see Tierney et al. 2011). We include all committed aid for education projects as coded by Aid Data researchers, totaling more than 79,000 projects and \$300

<sup>3</sup> Missing data in earlier years were supplemented with comparable data from UNESCO Yearbooks (defunct countries, such as East Germany, are not covered in current World Bank data files). Gaps shorter than 5 years were filled using linear interpolation (mainly an issue prior to 1980). These additions to our measure do not change results, but permit a more complete dataset.

**Table 1** Overview of hypotheses and indicators

| Hypothesis                                     | Predictor(s)                                      | Outcome(s)  | Findings  |
|--|---|---|---|
| 1a. Functional expansion                       | GDP/capita<br>Democracy<br># domestic CSOs        | # domestic CSOs   | See Table 2; includes control for population  |
| 2a. Functional effects                         | # domestic CSOs                                   | Spending<br>Aid<br>Secondary enrollment<br>Tertiary enrollment<br>Women in secondary<br>Women in tertiary | See Tables 3 and 4; includes controls for population, democracy, GDP/capita, and enrollment (when applicable) |
| 1b. World culture expansion                    | INGO memberships<br>State expansion<br>Enrollment | # domestic CSOs   | See Table 2; includes control for population  |
| 2b. World culture effects: domestic CSOs       | # domestic CSOs                                   | Spending<br>Aid<br>Secondary enrollment<br>Tertiary enrollment<br>Women in secondary<br>Women in tertiary | See Tables 3 and 4; includes controls for population, democracy, GDP/capita, and enrollment (when applicable) |
| 2c. World culture effects:<br>INGO memberships | INGO memberships                                  | Spending<br>Aid<br>Secondary enrollment<br>Tertiary enrollment<br>Women in secondary<br>Women in tertiary | See Tables 3 and 4; includes controls for population, democracy, GDP/capita, and enrollment (when applicable) |

All hypothesized associations between predictors and outcomes are positive

billion. Data are aggregated to the total amount of education aid (in constant 2011 \$US) committed in a given year and are logged for skew.

*Education spending* As a measure of national state investment in education, we use data on government spending on education taken from the World Development Indicators (World Bank 2014).

As controls and/or measures of functional explanations, we include:

*Population* is measured by the natural log of country population, rescaled by 10,000 to improve presentation (World Bank 2014).<sup>4</sup>

*Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita* captures a country's overall level of development and wealth and is an important control for the outcomes we examine below. We use real GDP based on purchasing power parity (PPP) in inflation-adjusted US dollars (logged). Data are taken from the Penn World Table (Feenstra et al. 2015).

*Democracy* Many outcomes addressed in this paper are plausibly affected by a society's overall level of democracy. Democracy is measured by the Polity IV twenty-one

point “polity” scale, which distinguishes between autocratic and democratic societies (Marshall et al. 2013).

## Findings

We turn now to panel regression models to explore the issue more fully. In Table 2 we consider evidence regarding the expansion of the domestic education CSO sector. We find little support for arguments that national capability promotes the expansion of CSOs, as predicted by functional arguments in Hypothesis 1a. The coefficients for GDP and democracy are positive, as expected, but the association is not statistically significant. It does not seem to be the case that national-level modernization is a central predictor of size of the CSO sector.

In contrast, we find evidence in support of our argument in Hypothesis 1b. Embeddedness in world culture, indicated by INGO memberships, an expanded state, and expanded secondary enrollments, is positively associated

<sup>4</sup> Rescaling does not affect the results.



**Table 2** Panel regression models with country fixed effects predicting the rise of education CSOs, 1970–2010

| Variables              | Education CSOs (log)          |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Population (log)       | 0.012<br>(0.119)              |
| GDP/cap (log)          | – 0.016<br>(0.056)            |
| Secondary enrollment   | 0.346*<br>(0.172)             |
| Democracy              | 0.003<br>(0.003)              |
| State expansion        | 0.104 <sup>+</sup><br>(0.058) |
| INGO memberships (log) | 0.130***<br>(0.031)           |
| Constant               | – 0.898<br>(0.899)            |
| Observations           | 4306                          |
| Countries              | 134                           |
| R-square               | 0.376                         |

Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; <sup>+</sup> $p < .10$

with domestic education CSOs.<sup>5</sup> Individual memberships in INGOs are not thought to directly generate more education CSOs; in the vast majority of cases, the INGOs do not focus on education. Instead, INGOs represent a diffuse linkage to world culture. Countries with more INGO memberships are filled with citizens that envision themselves as individuals who can and should get involved in global, voluntary organizations (Boli and Thomas 1997). Similarly, individuals with secondary schooling are not themselves thought to directly be responsible for forming CSOs. Perhaps a small proportion of those that go on to tertiary education directly perform this role. Instead, countries with larger mass school systems are presumed to embrace and embody the individualistic liberal principles of world culture more closely. Individuals, in this set of cultural ideologies, are empowered and rational decision-makers, and this assumption promotes the expansion of both mass education and organization. Countries made up of citizens with these world cultural proclivities are more attuned to all sorts of global cultural models and thus more likely to embrace them, with education and voluntary organizing being central to world cultural models.

<sup>5</sup> Other measures of state expansion measures are also positive, but often not significant. State expenditures per capita are consistently positive and significant in our models after egregious outliers (e.g., Gambia) are removed.

**Table 3** Panel regression models with country fixed effects predicting education spending and education aid

| Variables              | Education Spending           | Education Aid <sup>a</sup> |
|------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Population (log)       | – 0.83***<br>(0.191)         | 4.79***<br>(1.351)         |
| GDP/cap (log)          | 0.79***<br>(0.079)           | 0.84<br>(0.524)            |
| Democracy              | 0.004<br>(0.005)             | 0.08<br>(0.054)            |
| Education CSOs (log)   | 0.11 <sup>+</sup><br>(0.063) | 1.53*<br>(0.724)           |
| INGO memberships (log) | 0.10*<br>(0.042)             | 1.93***<br>(0.367)         |
| Constant               | 1.30<br>(1.031)              | – 39.83***<br>(7.139)      |
| Observations           | 2015                         | 3680                       |
| R-squared              | 0.543                        | 0.292                      |
| Countries              | 130                          | 110                        |

Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; <sup>+</sup> $p < .10$

<sup>a</sup>Developing countries only

The effect of world cultural indicators on the expansion of the domestic CSO sector is net of other important possible contributing factors, such as population size, country wealth, and level of democracy. This is the first such study to examine this argument in the context of education, although the findings support prior research that documented a similar pattern for the size of domestic CSO sectors overall (Schofer and Longhofer 2011) and specifically for the environmental sector (Longhofer and Schofer 2010).

We turn now to examine the relationship between education CSOs and a variety of relevant education outcomes, controlling for other factors (see Tables 3 and 4). Again we see limited support for arguments that emphasize variations in national levels of modernization; controls for GDP and democracy are generally positively related to education outcomes, but are inconsistently significant. There are, however, significant effects of the domestic CSO sector on education outcomes. Controlling for population, GDP/capita, and level of democracy, voluntary organizing (including domestic CSOs and INGO memberships) has a positive association with a rather astonishing array of education outcomes. Education spending, education aid levels, secondary enrollment, tertiary enrollment, and the share of women in tertiary education are all correlated with both an expanded domestic education CSO sector and INGO memberships. The only outcome that does not have

**Table 4** Panel regression models with country fixed effects predicting enrollments and women's share of enrollments in secondary and tertiary schooling

| Variables              | Secondary enrollment | Tertiary enrollment  | Women in secondary     | Women in tertiary       |
|------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Population (log)       | 0.11***<br>(0.032)   | – 0.17***<br>(0.029) | 24.97***<br>(4.565)    | 16.21*<br>(7.922)       |
| GDP/cap (log)          | 0.14***<br>(0.017)   | 0.09***<br>(0.021)   | – 1.02<br>(2.101)      | 8.27*<br>(3.528)        |
| Democracy              | 0.001<br>(0.001)     | 0.002*<br>(0.001)    | 0.03<br>(0.159)        | 0.04<br>(0.200)         |
| Secondary enrollment   |                      | 0.36***<br>(0.041)   | 10.39<br>(6.392)       | 62.17***<br>(9.506)     |
| Education CSOs (log)   | 0.04+<br>(0.026)     | 0.04*<br>(0.019)     | 3.87<br>(2.457)        | 7.99*<br>(3.440)        |
| INGO memberships (log) | 0.02**<br>(0.007)    | 0.02*<br>(0.009)     | 0.47<br>(0.804)        | 4.60**<br>(1.553)       |
| Constant               | – 1.94***<br>(0.172) | 0.07<br>(0.159)      | – 86.25***<br>(22.499) | – 195.33***<br>(37.293) |
| Observations           | 5086                 | 4986                 | 3338                   | 2912                    |
| R-squared              | 0.646                | 0.535                | 0.385                  | 0.565                   |
| Countries              | 139                  | 139                  | 138                    | 138                     |

Cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; + $p < .10$

a statistically significant association is the share of women in secondary, although the coefficients are positive.

Both functional and world cultural arguments predicted that domestic education CSOs would be tied to improved education outcomes. Hypothesis 2a, rooted in an optimistic functional vision of CSOs, argued there would be positive effects on education outcomes because of the work these organizations do. Notably, we do not find evidence of the more cynical view, asserting that CSOs are mainly corrupt or inept. Hypothesis 2b, rooted in updated neoinstitutional arguments that assert alignment between formal structures and outcomes over time, also argues there would be a positive association between domestic education CSOs and education outcomes. It is notable that we find little evidence of rampant decoupling, which would eradicate the positive association. Unfortunately, our data do not allow us to distinguish between these two interpretations of the positive association between domestic CSOs and desired education outcomes, although we can comfortably assert there is little evidence of either a cynical view of CSO work or evidence of endemic decoupling. We found no systematic evidence of the more critical views of civil society action in education—that they are inept, ineffective, or even harmful. Certainly, these critiques will be true in some cases, and most likely organizations could be more efficient, but on average there is widespread evidence of a positive association between domestic CSOs and an array of education outcomes.

Despite our inability to disentangle the causal mechanisms statistically, our first analysis, showing that world cultural factors contribute to the formation of domestic CSOs more than functional indicators, suggests that these entities are at least in part cultural carriers. An additional reason to suspect cultural factors are at work is there is a rather large gap between the types of organizations that are counted, and the outcomes measured. Some of the entities work directly in areas related, for example, to aid or gender equality, but many do not. Moreover, we group all these sorts of organizations together (rather than including, for example, only development organizations in the aid models). The data do not allow for such a fine-grained breakdown of the CSOs, but the world cultural arguments provide a rationale for why we expect indirect effects of all organizations even though many (most) included do not work directly toward the activities associated with the outcome. In contrast, it is unclear from a social capital stance why organizations that are not directly tied to work in an arena might still be positively associated with education outcomes.

The effects of domestic CSOs on education aid add another dimension to our focus on the dynamics of global and local levels in civil society. World cultural linkages promote the expansion of domestic education CSOs, which in turn increase the amount of education aid a country receives. Existing studies show that CSOs are an important funding intermediary when it comes to absorbing aid; 30

percent of all US aid is now estimated to flow into developing countries through private, non-governmental sources (Stroup 2012; Ilcan and Lacey 2011; Watkins et al. 2012). Contemporary international funding imageries call (and in some cases demand) for an expanded CSO sector. Thus, domestic CSOs not only emerge from world cultural ties; in education, they also deepen global connections by opening the door to increased levels of foreign aid, which can potentially have substantial consequences for domestic education sectors.

The findings also support Hypothesis 2c, where we posit that world cultural linkages through INGO memberships are tied to improved education outcomes. We find independent effects of linkage to world culture on education outcomes, even after controlling for the size of the domestic education CSO sector. Our study is among the first to examine whether the long-standing finding of a positive association between world cultural linkages and education continues to exist net of domestic organizing. Thus, although we cannot disentangle the functional and world cultural effects of domestic CSOs, we separately see world cultural effects on education outcomes through INGO memberships.

Overall, for our education outcomes, we envision several possible mechanisms through which CSOs matter, and suspect all paths operate simultaneously. First, there are some direct effects. A handful of organizations in our sample work squarely in the arena related to the outcome—e.g., providing girls education or seeking out and receiving education aid. Second, advocacy is a growing arena for CSOs, including in education (Suárez 2009; Reckhow 2012; Brass 2012; Tompkins-Stange 2016). A few organizations might be successfully lobbying to shape government policy, which is then generating positive effects. For example, perhaps education activists push for greater spending on education or greater access and equity. Third, and more phenomenological, the expansion of a domestic CSO sector might indicate an indigenization of initially world cultural principles that value both voluntary organizing and education.

Results must be interpreted in light of key limitations in our methods and data. Our analyses, which are based on observational data, may be suggestive of causal relationships, but one must be cautious in drawing strong conclusions. We attempted to address some forms of potential endogeneity, for instance via controls for alternative causal factors and country fixed effects (which address time-invariant heterogeneity across cases), but there are many potential confounding factors and in some cases the possibility of reverse-causal processes (discussed below). Moreover, cross-national data sources face numerous challenges. Efforts to assemble international data regarding domestic CSOs are in their infancy. Available data sources

only capture a small fraction of the total number of the total number of CSOs in a society, typically the largest and most established ones. Also, current sources typically involve survivor bias: CSOs that cease to exist often do not appear in current data sources and thus historical measures may underestimate the size of the sector. Some limited attempts have been made to assess the extent of bias resulting from these issues, for instance by corroborating data with alternate or older sources (e.g., Longhofer and Schofer 2010); results are encouraging, but more work is certainly needed. The saving grace, in our opinion, is that cross-national variation in CSO sector size is extremely large by any measure. Consequently, even imperfect or “noisy” measures can broadly distinguish the relative size of a country’s CSOs sector (Schofer and Longhofer 2011). Of course, this points to one more limitation: We focus on the overall size of the CSO sector, but such measures may not be useful in instances where social change hinges on the activities of a very small number of organizations. For instance, a single lobbying group can sometimes have large effects on state policy. Our analyses are not well suited to address such dynamics. In sum, we have attempted to assemble state-of-the-art data and models, but conclusions must be interpreted with these limitations in mind.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings have several important implications for thinking about how nonprofit organizations influence society. Results suggest that world cultural models—institutionalized and transmitted via international NGOs, the modern state, and education—promote the expansion of domestic CSO sectors. In turn, both world cultural models and the expansion of domestic CSOs contribute to improved education outcomes. Education and organizing go hand-in-hand, and results suggest that both are in part derivative of an overarching world culture. We outline our basic causal argument above, but the process may be more complex, and involve reinforcing dynamics—world culture promotes both education and organization, education promotes organizing, and organizing promotes education. The world culture perspective is agnostic about the direct effects of any single organization, because it is hard to disentangle the relative importance of concrete actions from a general movement of education and organization in the same direction. Instead, the central argument is that education and organization are institutional structure that stem from a common globalized liberal cultural frame. Over time these structures evolve in similar ways, spurred by shared cultural assumptions. As countries organize their education systems, whether in response to functional needs or global pressures, there is a massive re-organization of

society around education (including increasing numbers of CSOs, more education policies, more resource mobilization, higher enrollment, and so on). With the limitations of existing data, we are unable to unpack temporal sequences or mechanisms through which these changes occur, although as more data become available, we hope this type of research will be possible.

The statistical associations we observe do not necessarily mean that education CSOs are directly generating the outcomes we measure. In our view, domestic education CSOs are, at least in part, organizational indicators of the local penetration of world culture. Boli and Thomas' (1999) seminal work conceptualized INGOs as the embodiments of a global society, and Schofer and Longhofer extended this argument by showing the global sources of domestic CSOs (2011). Thus, it is world cultural assumptions that generate large-scale social change. In this instance the underlying cause of educational improvements is in part attributable to a growing world cultural emphasis on education, and this emphasis is reflected in the expansion of domestic education CSOs. Ours is the first study to consider the effects of domestic education CSOs on education outcomes, contributing to a long tradition examining the centrality of education in world culture (e.g., Meyer et al. 1977; Boli et al. 1985; Benavot and Riddle 1988; Meyer et al. 1992; Schofer and Meyer 2005; Baker 2014). Most likely, the mechanisms are multiple, some education CSOs have some real direct positive effects, but they are also embedded in broader processes of global cultural change.

Pushed to the extreme, our arguments question the notion of an autonomous domestic CSO "sector." Our findings also highlight general interpenetration of the global and national contexts and hint that international and domestic organizations may be cut from the same cloth. For instance, education CSOs appear to have an especially large effect on international education aid. One interpretation is that CSOs function like domestic extensions of world society (especially in the global South). Drawing upon shared global cultural frames, local CSOs can easily interface with global structures and resources, facilitating flows of resources. Following our constructivist argument, the "effects" of domestic CSOs derive substantially from the cultural frames in which they operate, rather than simply reflecting functional consequences of organizational action.

Our findings reflect broad associations that will not hold true for every organization or country. Observations of negative or ineffective activities of particular CSOs observed in particular countries do not necessarily conflict with our general statistical results. Furthermore, it is also possible that education CSOs are sub-optimally efficient and have much waste or corruption, yet still have net

positive effects on education outcomes. Or, possibly, a few outstanding and influential CSOs produce many of the gains. For example, in the case of the USA, Tompkins-Stange (2016) and Reckhow (2012) show how just a handful of large education foundations have meaningfully shaped US education policy.

The findings of our study support prior research showing the global source of domestic CSOs, but contrast in interesting ways with parallel research conducted in the environmental sector. Longhofer et al. (2016) found that domestic environmental CSOs had very little relationship to environmental policies although INGO memberships matter, while we find a strong association between education outcomes and both domestic education CSOs and INGOs. There are at least two possible reasons for this difference. First, as the authors note, environmentalism is a relatively new arena for CSOs, taking off in large part since the 1990s. Perhaps the effects of domestic CSOs will become larger as they grow in number and experience. The education nonprofit sector is relatively large compared to the environmental arena, and many organizations have long histories of voluntary service provision (e.g., religious schools) that may amplify their effects. Second, they study policy outcomes in the environmental arena, while here we examine features of education. Perhaps domestic organizations are more important for on-the-ground practices, while INGOs matter for both policies and practices.

Our study builds on nascent research showing that international cultural forces spur the expansion of domestic CSOs. Moreover, our results suggest that outcomes, in this case in the field of education, are tied to both expansion of domestic CSOs and increased ties to world culture. Domestic education CSOs likely matter in part because of their direct activities, but also because they are an indicator that a country has qualities that are more in line with a world culture that favors schooling. Importantly, for world cultural scholars, domestic CSOs have effects net of the linkage to world culture indicated by INGO memberships. Unfortunately, in this study we cannot offer a definitive explanation for the nuanced ways in which these two indicators capture different vehicles for the transmission of world culture into domestic settings. Case study research looking at the ways domestic CSOs and INGOs operate in countries would be highly valuable to spell out the mechanisms.

In sum, the data support arguments that more nonprofit organizing is associated with improved education outcomes. This is important, as surprisingly few studies examine the concrete impacts of the CSO sector with systematic data. We suspect that they have effect both directly through their work in education and more diffusely through the cultural frames they sustain, constructing an organized and rationalized society in which education is

central as a cultural matter. A more organized society is also a more equally educated one.

### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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