

# Worlds Apart But Much Alike: Donor Funding and the Homogenization of NGOs in Ghana and Indonesia

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**Abstract** In the field of civil society and democracy promotion, the relevance and effectiveness of donor strategies is often linked to their ability to adjust to local contextual factors. Despite the importance attached to tailor-made approaches, donor-sponsored democracy promoting NGOs in such different parts of the world as Ghana and Indonesia have very similar organizational characteristics. This paper explores the question of why they are so similar. We draw on institutional theory and use the concept of organizational isomorphism to illustrate how different pressures result in the homogenization of organizational characteristics. We find that besides the more commonly identified unequal power relation between donor and recipient, homogenization also stems from the NGOs themselves and from the relation between their various organizational characteristics (i.e., mission, staff, strategy, and structure). Furthermore, we argue that the process of homogenization can be seen as the institutionalization of trust between donor and recipient. In our discussion, we reflect on the limitations of our findings and on what they mean for donor support to NGOs and democracy.

**Keywords** Civil society · Democracy · Organizational isomorphism · International development aid · Ghana · Indonesia

## Introduction

In the 1990s, the international aid system embraced civil society organizations such as NGOs as the panacea for democracy and development. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, they were welcomed “as an antidote to state expansion” (Fowler 2000: 7)

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and “as the seedbeds of democracy” (Sørensen 1993: 57). A critical and vibrant civil society was generally perceived as a positive force for democracy (Ottaway and Carothers 2000). The many desirable functions of NGOs include serving as a check on state power, fostering public deliberation, helping to include the poor and marginalized, educating citizens on the norms and values of democracy, and being able to cater to local circumstances and local needs (Diamond 1999; Edwards 2004; Fowler 2000; Hendriks 2006; Houtzager and Lavallo 2010; Warren 2001).

This positive image deteriorated when studies from around the world showed that many donor-funded NGOs were not able to live up to these high expectations. Moreover, they linked this failure to the nature of the international aid system. Donor funding has various negative effects such as accountability to donors instead of constituencies, NGOs maintaining rather than challenging the status quo, and NGOs following donor priorities rather than their own (Elbers and Arts 2011; Fagan 2005; Hearn 2000, 2007; Parks 2008; Henderson 2002). In addition, several authors noted the tendency of donors to apply blueprint approaches and enforce a particular Western organizational paradigm in very different countries (Blaug 2002; Evans 2004; Easterly 2006). The outcome of these processes was that donor-sponsored NGOs around the world started resembling each other, a phenomenon which has been described by several names, such as “NGOization” (Alvarez 1999) and “institutional monocropping” (Evans 2004).

The aid system has been identified as an important factor in causing NGOs to homogenize. It is “a powerful structural force, impacting organizational landscapes and civil societies all over the world in complex ways we do not yet understand” (Tvedt 2002: 363). This lack of understanding is often linked to a lack of value-free systematic academic research on NGOs (Kopecký and Mudde 2003; Mercer 2002; Opoku-Mensah 2007; Ottaway and Carothers 2000). Opoku-Mensah (2007: 13), for instance, argues that NGO research “has remained largely normative and ‘action-oriented,’ paying relatively little attention to questions of power.” To incorporate these questions of power, an analytical approach is needed which recognizes that NGOs in developing countries do not necessarily express the societal needs and values of the country but often “mirror the needs and values expressed at donor conferences” (Tvedt 2007: 45).

Post-development theory is an approach which tackles these questions of power within the international aid system. According to Escobar (1995), the term “development” is a continuation of colonial discourse which differentiates between a modern developed world and a backward undeveloped world. This form of neo-colonialism especially serves to impose Western ideologies on developing countries. By using terminology like ownership, participation, and good governance, the development discourse conceals “an era of greater intervention by international agencies in the internal affairs of developing countries” (Mosse 2005: 2). Even at project level, these processes can be disguised as local input. Green (2003) for instance shows that despite “participatory planning approaches,” the underlying logframes create a manageable reality from which it is difficult to diverge. As such, the input of beneficiaries hardly impacts on development outcomes. In post-development theory, NGOs are not seen as forces of emancipation for the poor, but like in colonial times serve “to shore

up those forces that have come to subjugate and imiserate the majority” (Manji and O’Coill 2002: 582). Hence, Cornwall and Brock (2005: 1043) argue that “civil society,” “voices of the poor,” and similar buzzwords which “once spoke of politics and power have come to be reconfigured in the service of today’s one-size-fits-all development recipes, spun into an apoliticized form that everyone can agree with.” According to Ferguson (2007: 91) it is exactly this “ahistorical and uncritical use of the concept of civil society which serves to help legitimate a profoundly antidemocratic transnational politics.”

While post-development contributes to our understanding of homogenization from a macroperspective in the form of ideological neo-colonialism, this study aims to contribute to our understanding at a micro-level of why NGOs are so similar by looking at how donor funding affects the concrete organizational characteristics of NGOs (their mission, staff, strategy, and structure). We analyze these processes for donor-sponsored NGOs in Ghana and Indonesia. Previous analysis of these NGOs has shown that they are strikingly similar in their organizational characteristics despite contextual differences (Kamstra et al. 2013). This study builds on the outcomes of that analysis and focuses on finding an explanation for such similarities.

To uncover the processes stimulating the homogenization of organizations, we use the concept of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Boxenbaum and Jonsson 2008; Scott 2008). This concept has been widely applied in business, nonprofit and administrative science literature to tackle questions of organizational similarity (see for instance, Benders et al. 2006; Dacin 1997; Fiss and Zajac 2004; Frumkin and Galaskiewicz 2004; Reay and Hinings 2009; Tolbert and Zucker 1983). In contrast, there are only a few empirical studies on development NGOs devoted to this phenomenon (these include Aksartova 2009; Ramanath 2009; Ebrahim 2002 and 2005). None of these studies, however, use variation in context as a starting point for their analysis. For our analysis, this is important because, as Ghana and Indonesia are such different countries, we minimized the chance that the similarities in organizational characteristics are actually caused by similarities in the social, cultural, economic, and political environments.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, we explain our research methodology and summarize the outcomes of our previous analysis of the Ghanaian and Indonesian democracy promoting NGOs. Second, we introduce the concept of institutional isomorphism. Third, we show that in both the Ghana and Indonesia, international actors have become more important for NGO survival than national actors. Fourth, we use the notion of institutional isomorphism to analyze how donor dependency affects the organizational characteristics of NGOs in terms of mission, staff, strategy, and structure. We find that besides the more often identified imposition of rules and regulations by donors, there are many more subtle processes stimulating homogenization, which also stem from the NGOs themselves. This nuances the ideas underlying post-development approaches, where homogenization is mainly depicted as a top-down process. We conclude our empirical analysis with a flow chart showing the various forces at work, and more importantly, how they are interrelated and reinforce each other. Finally, we reflect on the meaning of our findings, discuss limitations and implications for future research, and describe some implications for donor agencies wishing to support NGOs and democracy.

## Data and Methods

The article is based on extensive fieldwork in Ghana (Accra) and Indonesia (Jakarta) between November 2007 and April 2009. The fieldwork consists of 47 in-depth interviews with 43 respondents, principally with directors, researchers, and founding members of the NGOs. To balance their stories, interviews were conducted with local experts, i.e., political scientists, NGO consultants, and representatives of major bilateral and multilateral donor agencies in the country (for an overview, see [Appendix](#)). In addition to interview data, the analysis uses the annual reports, funding reports, internal documents, and Web sites and publications of the selected NGOs.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subsequently analyzed through a process of coding in the software package Atlas.ti. In this process, “codes” are assigned to demarcated text segments. There are many types of codes, including codes based on terms which are used by respondents, codes derived from theory, codes which are “invented” by the researcher, or purely descriptive codes (Spencer et al. 2003). The process started out with assigning thematic codes. This can be seen as a combination of theoretical and descriptive coding as the codes are descriptive in nature, but their importance has been derived from theory. This included codes which had to do with the organizational characteristics of the NGOs, such as “structure,” “mission,” “personnel,” and “strategy.” Another family of codes started zooming in on the specific relation between NGOs and their donors and the various aspects of this relation such as “resources” and “accountability.” Finally, by comparing and linking both types of codes it became possible to establish patterns and identify deviant cases within the large amount of interview data (Ritchie 2003). This final stage of the process is called selective coding, where “previously identified discrete concepts and categories are further defined, developed, and refined and then brought together to tell a larger story” (Price 2010: 158). Based on the comparisons, important quotes were grouped which referred to aspects of the process of isomorphism including (again) “accountability,” “dependency,” “agenda setting,” and “small NGO scene.” These categories formed the main input for the analysis in this paper.

The research was organized so as to maximize the chance of finding different NGOs by looking in two different parts of the world. The underlying idea was that democracy and civil society are context-specific phenomena and that supporting them therefore requires a tailor-made approach (Howell and Pearce 2001). To study the NGOs within their specific contexts, the research employed a comparative case study design. By contrasting the contexts, it is possible to examine how different conditions cause different outcomes of the phenomenon (Yin 2003). Ghana and Indonesia represent the different contexts, and the democratization NGOs represent the phenomenon.

The NGOs have been selected by means of criterion sampling (Miles and Huberman 1994). It is a qualitative sample, and as such, it is not randomized and not representative in statistical terms. The purpose of this sampling technique is to capture the variety of a phenomenon within the boundaries of the criteria. Three criteria guided the selection. The first criterion was that the NGOs work in the field of promoting (aspects of) democracy. The second criterion was that they are supported by international donors, which ensures that they are in fact related to the international aid system. Although we did not restrict our selection to one type of donor, bilateral and multilateral agencies such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), USAID, and SIDA are the

most prominent donors behind the selected NGOs.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, it is important to note here that the level of donor dependency was not part of the second selection criterion, i.e., high donor dependency was an outcome, not an input. The third criterion was that the aforementioned local experts had to consider them to be important players in the field of democratization in their country. Based on these criteria, a short list of organizations was compiled which captured a diverse group in terms of the focus, age, and size of the organization. Table 1 provides an overview.

### Context-specific Democracy Promoting NGOs?

Our previous analysis compared the organizational characteristics of these Ghanaian and Indonesian democracy-promoting NGOs and explored to what extent similarities and differences indicated context-specificity (for a full account, see Kamstra et al. 2013). It started from the notion that civil society and democracy “in any context have a history and must develop in tune with their particular historical, cultural and political rhythms” (Howell and Pearce 2001: 121). If NGOs are to contribute to home-grown democracy, they need to adapt their “mission, their functions and their structures” to the social and political context in which they operate (Diamond 1999: 230). Beyond these general statements, however, context specificity is not specified in terms of what kind of organization would be best for what kind of context. To overcome this, we set out to construct and apply a framework for determining the context specificity of democracy-promoting NGOs in terms of their mission, strategy, structure, and financial and human resources.

First, based on the premise that each country follows its own path to democracy and encounters different obstacles on its way (Carothers 2002; Munck 2009), a mission statement is considered context-specific when it reflects these obstacles for democratic development. In Ghana, these are widespread poverty, high rates of illiteracy, lack of decentralization, and problems with the separation of powers (Abdulai and Crawford 2010; Lindberg and Zhou 2009; Crawford 2008; Owusu 2005), while in Indonesia conflict (past and present), human rights violations and corruption are the main issues (Aspinall and Van Klinken 2011; Brancati 2006; Fitriani et al. 2005; Kaufmann et al. 2009). We found that in both Ghana and Indonesia, the mission statements and, subsequently, the areas in which the NGOs work, do indeed reflect these different problems, and can therefore be termed “context-specific.”

Second, although the appropriate strategy (i.e., confrontational or nonconfrontational) always depends on the specific situation, on a more abstract level, a strategy is considered context-specific when it fits with the type of state-society relations in a country. The current legal environments in Ghana and Indonesia allow a similar range of NGO activities, but state-society relations make it more likely for Indonesian NGOs to pursue confrontational strategies than NGOs in Ghana. In contrast to Ghana, the transition to democracy was particularly violent in Indonesia. This reinforced a sense of

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the NGOs are also supported by other types of donors, such as foundations and private aid agencies. ISODEC for instance has a long term funding relation with the NGO Oxfam NOVIB, and Elsam is supported by a consortium of international NGOs, including EED (Germany), MISEREOR (Germany), HIVOS (Netherlands) and 11.11.11 (Belgium).

**Table 1** Basic characteristics of the NGOs

	Organization	Full name	Establishment	Main focus	Size (no. of staff) <sup>a</sup>
Ghana	IEA	Institute of Economic Affairs	1989	Political and economic issues	Medium
	CDD	Center for Democratic Development	1998	Political and economic issues	Medium
	IDEG	Institute of Democratic Governance	2000	Political issues	Medium
	ISODEC	Integrated Social Development Center	1987	Social service delivery and social inequalities	Big
	Abantu	Abantu for Development	1998	Gender inequalities	Small
Indonesia	Partnership	Partnership for Democratic Governance Reform	2000	Civil society building and political and administrative issues	Big
	Yappika	The Civil Society Alliance for Democracy	1991	Civil society building and human rights	Medium
	KID	Indonesian Community for Democracy	2004	Political education and political party dialogue	Small
	PSHK	Centre for Indonesian Law and Policy Studies	1998	Legal reform	Medium
	Demos	Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies	2002	Democracy and human rights	Medium
	ELSAM	Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy	1993	Democracy and human rights	Medium

Sources: interviews, NGO Web sites, and NGO documents

<sup>a</sup> Small,  $n < 10$ ; medium,  $10 < n < 40$ ; big,  $n > 40$

mutual suspicion and distrust between state officials and civil society groups (Clarke 1998; Hadiwinata 2003). State officials generally see civil society actors as destabilizing, and many NGOs still perceive of the state as an adversary. As a result, “many of civil society’s tactics are confrontational and hardnosed” (Ibrahim 2006: 7). In Ghana, state-society relations also started out from low levels of mutual trust, but since the transition to democracy, there has been a growing space for interaction between NGO leaders, government officials, and even activists (Darkwa et al. 2006). State-society relations improved most notably when the opposition party New Patriotic Party (NPP) first came to power in 2000. While in opposition, the NPP had collaborated with many NGOs, which improved mutual understanding and trust (interview; University of Ghana, Faculty of Political Science, November 2007). In such a context, it is less likely and perhaps less necessary for NGOs to resort to confrontational strategies. Despite these different contexts, in both Ghana and Indonesia we found that nonconfrontational research and advocacy was the strategy which was almost exclusively applied by the NGOs, while only Integrated Social Development Center (ISODEC) in Ghana and the Civil Society Alliance for Democracy (Yappika) in Indonesia occasionally resorted to more confrontational advocacy tactics like organizing mass demonstrations.

Third, in terms of organizational structure, we explored two ways of determining context specificity. The first was to see whether the sample of democracy-promoting NGOs shows at least some of the variety of organizational forms which can be found in both Ghanaian and Indonesian civil society. This proved to be a difficult approach as the legal framework in both Ghana and Indonesia allows for a whole range of organizational forms, and subsequently, their civil society sectors are populated by all sorts of formal and informal associations (Darkwa et al. 2006; Ibrahim 2006). Also, because this criterion looks at a spectrum of organizational forms in an NGO community, it does not tell us much about the context specificity of the organizational structure of individual NGOs. Therefore, we used the premise that NGOs promote democracy because they act as vehicles for involving citizens (Clarke 1998; Diamond 1999; Edwards 2004; Hendriks 2006). In this sense, we equate context specificity with having a democratic structure which is open to membership participation of all kinds of citizens. Considering both criteria, our findings do not indicate context specificity, because in both Ghana and Indonesia, we predominantly found NGOs with hierarchical nonmembership structures which were closed to societal input. Furthermore, we found that the NGOs with a democratic structure (ISODEC and Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies (Demos)) were struggling to include their constituencies as members. Both organizations intend to be more inclusive, but neither has succeeded in doing so because their constituencies are relatively large and sometimes difficult to reach.

Fourth, and similarly, we explored two ways of determining the context specificity of human resources. One way would be to assess whether the people working for the NGOs reflect different societal groups. This is a difficult approach, as it requires defining important societal groups in Ghana and Indonesia which are complex societies with multiple divisions between ethnic, religious, social, and economic groups. Therefore, we used a (crude) distinction, which is often made in nonprofit literature, between organizations that are dominated by professional staff and organizations that are dominated by volunteers and activists (Hwang and Powell 2009). We would expect NGOs to not only work with professionals but also use volunteers and activists to strengthen the link with the communities they work for. Both benchmarks indicate that our findings are not context-specific. In both Ghana and Indonesia, we found NGOs which are dominated by hired professionals with an elite profile, namely highly trained academics, many of whom received education in the West. Furthermore, the volunteers that work within the NGOs are small in number and resemble the elite profile of the staff. This means that instead of including a diversity of domestic groups, in both countries, the NGOs are controlled by an academic elite.

Finally, raising your own income and independence from external donors were used as a benchmark for determining financial context specificity. To this principle, a “reality check” was added by looking at various economic indicators which represent the potential for raising an income locally. Our findings indicated that both in Ghana and Indonesia NGOs lacked financial context specificity because of their donor dependence. However, this was more expected of Ghanaian than of Indonesian NGOs because the Indonesian context provides NGOs with more opportunities of raising an income locally (Kluijver 2010).

Based on our framework, we can conclude that Ghanaian NGOs are more in tune with their context than Indonesian NGOs. At the same time, the similarities we found



across both countries are striking. Regardless of the context, the dominant organizational form is that of a hierarchic nonmembership organization (structure), which is dependent on donors for its finances (financial resources), and which is owned and run by an academic elite (human resources) that focuses on doing research and nonconfrontational lobby and advocacy work, such as organizing seminars, roundtables, and debates (strategy). This contrasts with the image of an “ideal” democracy-promoting NGO, which is financially independent, has a leadership that is elected by and accountable to its members, is open to membership participation, and can act as a countervailing power because confrontational advocacy tactics such as mass demonstrations are also part of its repertoire. Our findings therefore largely confirm the image “that these internationally supported groups are different from the civil society groups that have been described as being so crucial to democracy” (Sabatini 2002: 9). This paper builds on these outcomes by exploring the role of donor funding in the similarities we encountered.

### **Institutional Isomorphism and Democracy Promoting NGOs**

Within the field of organizational institutionalism, the concept of *institutional isomorphism* is used to explain how and why organizations tend to become more similar over time (DiMaggio and Powell 1983: 149–152). Some argue that isomorphism is the result of a competitive struggle between organizations. The environment can sustain only a limited number of organizational setups, so nonisomorphic organizations are selected against (Hannan and Freeman 1977). In contrast, Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue that organizations tend to be isomorphic because they incorporate institutional rules which function as rationalized myths in society. Organizations do so because it increases their legitimacy, their access to resources and, as such, their chances of survival, even if the adopted practices and procedures are not directly conducive to the core activity of the organization. In other words, adaptation is important because it increases legitimacy rather than performance.

Three mechanisms drive isomorphic change: coercive isomorphism, mimetic isomorphism, and normative isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Coercive isomorphism stems from unequal power relations. The formal and informal rules and expectations of powerful actors can have a strong homogenizing effect on the groups of organizations who depend upon them. The most powerful actor in this respect is usually the state. Failure to comply with the rules can result in punishment, loss of resources, and/or loss of legitimacy. Mimetic isomorphism is the result of uncertainty. In fields where it is difficult to measure performance, there are no clear indicators for what is the best or most desirable practice. Organizations react to this uncertainty by attempting to model themselves after organizations in their field that are perceived to be successful and legitimate. Finally, normative isomorphism is related to the concept of professionalization. Organizations conform to what is perceived to be the right thing to do. Two main sources of professionalization are formal education and the growth and elaboration of professional networks and bodies. Both instill individuals with almost identical norms and values about best practices. Coercive isomorphism is the result of vertical relations between organizations, whereas mimetic and normative isomorphism stem from horizontal relations between peers (Boxenbaum and Jonsson 2008).



The concept organizational isomorphism has not often been used to describe the aid system. Nevertheless, it is very relevant for understanding some of the existing structures and processes which lead to the homogenization of actors within this field. If we take the perspective of democratization NGOs, we can identify several actors which could be important for their legitimacy and survival, namely the state, citizens, fellow NGOs, and international donor agencies. With each type of actor, both horizontal and vertical relations are possible, and interactions with these actors can initiate all three forms of isomorphism. The state can be seen as a regulatory agency, but also as a target for NGOs advocacy activities, and sometimes even as a “customer” of NGO service delivery, research, and/or consultancy. Similarly, international donors can impose rules and regulations which accompany funding, but can also be strategic partners and “customers” of NGO service delivery, research, and/or consultancy. Citizens can be passive, as constituents, customers, or targets of the NGOs. At the same time, they can also be active, as the members (or even owners), volunteers, supporters, or financial contributors to NGOs. Finally, fellow NGOs can be important as partners, as competitors, or as donors.

All these actors put different demands on NGOs, but the strongest demands come from actors which can influence the survival of the NGOs. As Meyer and Rowan (1977) have pointed out, organizations adapt to gain legitimacy and access to resources and to thereby increase their chances of survival. In other words, either adaptation will bring rewards (resources/legitimacy), or lack of adaptation will have negative consequences for an NGO (loss of resources/legitimacy). In the next section, we will shortly evaluate the importance of each actor for Ghanaian and Indonesian NGOs in terms of recourses and legitimacy.

### **Shifting Importance from National to International Actors for NGO Survival**

The state is not an important actor for NGOs in terms of resources, as state support is hardly available in either Ghana or Indonesia. While in many European countries, the government is one of the biggest financers of NGO activities, this pattern does not apply to poorer countries (Wang 2006). Although it is possible to get government contracts for social service delivery activities, it is very unlikely to receive funding for the more politically sensitive activity of promoting democracy (Darkwa et al. 2006; Ibrahim 2006). Conforming to state demands is mainly important in terms of legitimacy. In both Ghana and Indonesia, the state has long been the most powerful actor, regulating and controlling NGO activity. Both countries have a history of NGO repression. During the military regimes of Suharto (Indonesia) and Rawlings (Ghana), only de-politicized NGO activities such as relief and community welfare activities were permitted. All other independent NGO activity was looked upon with suspicion, and vocal NGOs were actively repressed or co-opted (Gyimah-Boadi and Oquaye 2000; Hadiwinata 2003). To fight for democracy in such a context is dangerous, and NGOs adopted nonconfrontational tactics in order to avoid persecution. In Indonesia, NGOs had to act like chameleons and adopt the state ideology as their own ideology (Hadiwinata 2003). In short, to be able to exist (at least officially), conforming to state demands was of utmost importance.

Although NGOs still need to conform to the rules and regulations of the state, the rules have become less restrictive. As a result, the influence of the state over the shape and direction of NGOs has decreased considerably. Toward the end of the military regimes in Ghana and Indonesia, societal groups became more vocal, openly confronting the regimes with demands for change. In both countries, the transition to democracy opened the space for NGOs to pursue their own agendas and have their own ideologies. Currently, the legal framework of both countries allows for many different organizational forms, both membership and nonmembership, centralized or decentralized, and formal or informal organizations, to exist. Furthermore, in terms of strategies, in both Ghana and Indonesia, nonconfrontational and confrontational forms of advocacy are allowed (Darkwa et al. 2006; Ibrahim 2006). In other words, the state allows for a lot more variation in organizational characteristics than the actual variation encountered.

In Ghana and Indonesia, NGOs do not depend upon each other for survival. Fellow NGOs could be important for survival if they are gatekeepers for access to various kinds of resources such as funding and network resources (i.e., contacts with politicians). In times of repression in particular, survival can also depend upon collaboration with groups of like-minded and trusted organizations. Although some of the NGOs in our sample are gatekeepers for access to resources with regard to partner organizations at the local level, this is not the case at the national level. At the national level, the democratization NGOs in both Ghana and Indonesia can be considered as peers. They have interdependencies, either as competitors and/or partners, but they do not directly rely upon each other for resources or legitimacy. Collaboration for survival is also not as necessary as there is no systematic repression.

Citizens can be important actors for the survival of NGOs both in terms of resources and legitimacy. As (active) members, as volunteers, and as financial contributors, they have the potential to influence the shape and direction of an organization. During the democratic turnover in Indonesia especially, citizen participation in NGOs played an important role (Schwarz 1999). Nowadays, however, citizens have no major part to play in them. This becomes very clear if we look at the organizational constellation of the NGOs in our sample. They are hierarchically structured (mostly) nonmembership-based organizations, working with a professional staff, using (mostly) nonconfrontational strategies, and depending on donors for most of their income. In other words, citizens are not active as members, they are hardly used as volunteers because NGOs work with professionals, they are rarely mobilized as supporters in mass protest actions to legitimize NGO claims because NGOs employ nonconfrontational advocacy strategies, and finally, citizens are not used for contributions as the money comes from donors.

International donors are currently the single most important actors for the survival of the selected NGOs, both in terms of legitimacy and resources. None of the NGOs claims to raise more than 20 % of their income locally. In contrast, donors provide substantial resources which would have otherwise been unavailable to NGOs in Ghana and Indonesia. In order to access these resources, NGOs need to gain legitimacy in the eyes of donors. This puts donors in a position to exert a lot of influence over NGOs because lack of adaptation to donor requirements risks the loss of legitimacy and funding.

In sum, our actor analysis firmly points to international donors as a potential source of homogenization. This finding is not particularly new as we know that donors “are positioned to influence nonprofit mission and activity [...] because of their close control of the financial resources or inputs needed by nonprofits to survive” (Frumkin and Galaskiewicz 2004: 290), and “civil society organizations often have to alter their missions and characters to obtain such incomes” (Wang 2006: 25). Nevertheless, our analysis adds that this position of international donor has to be related to the absence or weakness of national actors and their demands. The two most prominent forces which could have rooted NGOs in their national context, and which could have caused NGOs to organize differently in Ghana and Indonesia, are the state and citizens. These actors could have confronted NGOs with important demands. In the current setting, however, national demands have been largely absent. The state has the power to make demands, but their regulation is not very restrictive anymore. Citizens can make demands, but these are not of crucial importance as NGOs do not depend upon them for their survival.

### **Donor Dependence and the Process of Homogenization**

Although donor funding has been pointed out as a source of homogenization, we do not have a detailed understanding of how this process works. This section therefore analyzes how donor dependence affects the way NGOs organize in terms of their mission, their structure, their staff, and their strategy. Besides the direct imposition of rules and regulations, homogenization can also be the result of more subtle and less explicit forces at work (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). It is especially important to unravel these indirect forces because they are keys to understanding the process of homogenization and the role of both donors and NGOs in it.

#### **Mission, Agenda Setting, and the Importance of Language**

Although the mission statements of the NGOs relate to different problems in Ghana and Indonesia, the terminology they use to frame their work is very similar. Consider for instance the mission of the Indonesian NGO Partnership:

“Disseminating, advancing and institutionalizing the principles of good and clean governance among government, civil society and business, while considering human rights, gender balance, the marginalized and environmental sustainability.” ([www.kemitraan.or.id](http://www.kemitraan.or.id)).

Compare it with the mission of the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) in Ghana:

“Our mission is to promote good governance, democracy and a free and fair market economy. We believe that the creation of an environment in which economic, social, political and legal institutions function openly and freely is the key to sustainable economic growth and human development.” ([www.ieagh.org](http://www.ieagh.org)).

Both rely heavily on what Craig and Porter (2006) call “NGO terminology,” which is common in Western debates on (neoliberal) democracy and development and features terms like “sustainability,” “empowerment,” and “good governance.”

Having a mission statement and using the right language is important for getting access to funding. For instance, the term “good governance” can be found in mission statements in both Ghana and Indonesia. According to one respondent, this is not strange because “good governance is the mantra. If you use the word good governance, you can make money” (interview; NGO consultant, Jakarta, March 2008). Similarly, one Indonesian NGO director notes that finding support “is not always easy because we have to find the right language. I mean, maybe our ideas are in line with what they want, but sometimes we have to find the right language in the proposal” (interview; Centre for Indonesian Law and Policy Studies (PSHK), April 2008). In Jakarta, you can hire people who are specialized in proposal writing to make sure you use the right language. This strategy of framing is a good example of how isomorphism can work indirectly. It is not something which is directly imposed on the NGOs by donors, but NGOs choose to adopt it in order to get access to resources.

Besides adopting donor language, in Ghana, we find some evidence of NGOs adopting each other’s language and programmatic focus to get access to funding. There are three policy think-tanks (IEA, Center for Democratic Development (CDD), and Institute of Democratic Governance (IDEG)) with almost identical mission statements, namely to promote “democracy and good governance” in Ghana. Furthermore, the kind of programs they implement to attain this mission also resemble each other. One respondent expressed frustration about this copying behavior:

“If you are working in training parliamentarians, suddenly everybody thinks let’s also go into parliament. [...] Whereas you could collaborate and get better results, people are just doing very similar things” (interview; NGO Ghana, December 2007)<sup>2</sup>.

Later on in the interview, the respondent explains that it is the strong competition for funding and the resulting distrust between the NGOs which hampers collaboration and stimulates duplication. This could be explained by the fact that it is difficult to measure performance in the field of democratization. This introduces a lot of uncertainty for an NGO, which needs to show its donors that what it is doing is relevant. Therefore, modeling oneself after a successful peer can be used as a strategy to gain legitimacy and access to resources. In the case of these three think-tanks, the link between the three is very direct because some of IEA’s former employees went on to become founding members of IDEG and CDD.

Earmarking is the name given to the most direct form of interference by donors with the mission and programmatic focus of an NGO. Many of the NGOs in Indonesia observe the tendency of donors to earmark more of their funding. In this way, they directly influence what an NGO should do in order to get funding. According to one respondent, donors used to be more flexible, but nowadays, “they are more concerned that we use the money for a particular issue like the poverty issue or the issue of pluralism” (interview; Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy (ELSAM), April

<sup>2</sup> Anonymous because of the sensitivity of the issue.

2008). The tendency of donors to spend their money according to their own priorities also affects a big institution like Partnership:

“In the donor coordination meeting they usually present their programs, their priorities. We can have some information on that [...] and then we basically draft our proposals based on their guidelines” (interview; Partnership, April 2008).

Crawford (2003) argues that international donors played an active role in setting Partnership’s agenda, not only by putting certain topics on the agenda but also by keeping some sensitive issues off the agenda, like the role of the military. While respondents in Ghana did not use the term earmarking, the processes they describe are very similar:

“I still believe that there are donors who push the agenda. You can send your strategic plan and if they are not interested they won’t give you anything. You know, they will still try to tilt it a little bit to themselves.” (interview; IEA, December 2007).

ISODEC mentioned that their most important donor (Oxfam Novib) changed their focus to other West-African countries, “to make ourselves relevant to Oxfam Novib, we had to develop a program that had West-Africa as a focus.” Not conforming to what donors want is risky, because “if what you are doing does not fall within their priorities, they can decide to stop funding at any time and then they just leave you hanging there” (interview; ISODEC, December 2007). This clearly illustrates the impact of donor dependence: if there are no other funding sources available, you have to adapt your organization to suit donor demands or face bankruptcy.

These processes put NGOs between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, they want to keep their integrity, pursue their own mission, and set their own agendas, while on the other hand, they need money to sustain their organizations. Throughout the interviews with the NGO directors, researchers and project managers in both Ghana and Indonesia, a similar pattern kept returning. Respondents would state that their organization pursues its own agenda and deny following donor demands, while later on in the interview they would acknowledge or vent their frustration about the influence of donors on their agenda. The following quote of a Ghanaian NGO staff member shows this struggle in a nutshell:

“We don’t go in the direction of where the wind is blowing. Because sometimes there is a lot of money out there, but you would have to alter your mandate to be able to access it. We don’t shift our agenda to be able to access funding.” (interview; Abantu, December 2008)

Nevertheless, the same respondent also states that

“A lot of times, if we had our own way, we would do things differently. A lot of times we wish we did not have to take anybody’s money to work with.” (interview; Abantu, December 2008)

The NGOs are not powerless however. They use several strategies to reduce the influence of donors (see also Elbers and Schulpen 2011). First, they attempt to avoid being dependent on one donor by seeking support from multiple donors. This is especially an issue for Indonesian Community for Democracy (KID), which relies on the Netherlands Institute of Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) for most of its funds. As a result, “sustainability is a big challenge, and I think we are now trying to expand the possibility of funding from other donors, in order to anticipate this question of sustainability” (interview; KID, April 2008). Second, they can approach the donors that are most likely to fund their activities. This is how Demos operates: “Following our agenda, we have to see which donor agencies have a track record in doing this kind of work. We try to approach them and to convince them about the importance of these programs.” (interview; Demos, March 2008). Third, they try to earn some of their own income, mostly by selling their expertise through consultancy work for the government. Finally, the use of donor language can also be a strategy to reduce donor influence. By defining a broad mission, which “deals with democracy and good governance,” CDD anticipates shifts in donor focus. This kind of mission statement captures many different topics, like “transparency, representation, participation, integrity and nowadays the topic of decentralization. So at any point in time most of the focus of donor support will align nicely with the CDD objective” (interview; CDD, December 2007). This last strategy can be labeled as a form of decoupling because it functions as a buffering strategy which enables the NGO to protect the core of their work from external influence (Ebrahim 2002: 104). Nevertheless, at CDD, they also argue that the bottom line remains that “there is a power relation when somebody is supporting you,” which means there will always be “a limit to the extent in which you can make significant input and change the direction of whatever proposal the donor is making” (interview; CDD, December 2007).

### Professional Staff as Outcome and Driver of Isomorphism

In terms of personnel, the NGOs are dominated by an (often) internationally educated academic elite. On the one hand, donors actively contribute to this by encouraging their partner organizations to hire high-quality staff. The Ghana Research and Advocacy Program (G-RAP) provides a good example. This consortium of bilateral donors, which provides funding to all the Ghanaian NGOs in our sample, states in its mid-term review that the organizations they fund should be “more able to attract, retain, motivate, and develop capable staff” and that with this staff NGOs will be able to “generate high quality evidence-based research based on robust primary sources” (Brown and Atampugre 2007: 9–10). According to one respondent, donors can be very rigid in this respect:

“Some of their requirements are quite constraining. For example you know a very good economist without a PhD, but they say they want an economist with a PhD. [...] You end up picking an inexperienced PhD. [...] They have very rigid requirements, and you have to fit.”(interview; IDEG, December 2007)

On the other hand, NGOs use acquiring qualified staff as a strategy to raise the quality of their work and thereby gain the trust of donors, because “I believe that if we



have a high quality of work, then many donors will trust us” (interview; PSHK, April 2008). This trust is needed not only to gain funding but also to account for it. One interviewee claims, for instance, that “you need very qualified chartered accountants to be able to report to your donors” (interview; CDD, December 2008). The opposite is also true; if you are not able to hire competent staff, donors might lose their trust. One organization which struggles with this problem is ISODEC. Due to a lack of finances, they experience problems hiring and retaining highly educated staff, which complicates their ability to meet donor requirements (ISODEC 2006).

Again, the issue of language is important. If you do not speak the language of the donor, you will not be able to access funding. For the NGOs, it is important to have staff members who “graduated from European or American universities. They can write a proposal in good English and present it in a very sophisticated PowerPoint. Without that, you cannot get any money” (interview; NGO consultant, Jakarta, 2008). Furthermore, it is one thing to speak English, but it is another thing to be able to relate to the international debates on good governance, democratization, legal reform, and gender mainstreaming. In this respect, it greatly helps NGOs that many of their staff members studied these subjects abroad and are educated in the terminology used by donors. An additional advantage is that because of their expertise and their ability to justify their work in donor terminology, professionals strengthen the bargaining position of NGOs in relation to their funders (Ebrahim 2002).

Having a highly educated staff which speaks the “donor language” also has its drawbacks. According to one respondent, the problem with NGO staff in Jakarta is that “it has become too elite” and as a result,

“their language is not something that people understand. [...] For instance, it is very difficult to use the word good governance in Indonesian. People don’t understand what it is, it is very difficult for you to sell the governance issues. We have an Indonesian translation, but what does it really mean?” (interview; Asian Development Bank, March 2008).

In other words, the disadvantage of using donor terminology is that it alienates local constituencies. Furthermore, it indicates that donors end up sponsoring NGOs which are led by a quite homogenous group of local elites who know each other very well. In Accra, “everybody knows everybody” (interview; IEA, December 2007) and in Jakarta, “it is a small development world. So if you draft a proposal, you would meet the same persons all over again” (interview; Partnership, April 2008). This reduces the plurality of inputs and increases the chances of copying behavior. Thus, one donor notes, “There are so many actors now in the governance scene, working on very similar areas” (interview; UNDP, April 2008).

As pointed out by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), education is an important source of homogenization. Through education, people internalize shared norms and terminology which makes it easier for them to communicate with each other. The fact that most of the NGO personnel have a university education and that many studied in donor countries is a strong sign of normative isomorphism. Education and professionalization does not only influence the language the staff use but also their perception of the world, its problems, and the kind of solutions available to these problems (mission and strategy). A group of academics in Jakarta or Accra will define different problems



and goals than a group of farmers or urban poor in the same country. In the next section, we show that this is also the case for strategy.

### Strategy Follows Support and Education

Besides influencing the focus areas of NGOs, donor funding also influences the kind of strategies NGOs use to tackle these topics. In Ghana, for instance, in order to be able to get funding from the aforementioned G-rap program, an organization must employ the strategy of research and advocacy. Furthermore, our finding that confrontational advocacy strategies, such as mass protest actions, are less utilized indicates that they are not popular among the selected NGOs. There are several reasons why they would rather employ nonconfrontational strategies. First, and unrelated to donor funding, many of the NGOs have close relations with the state officials they try to influence and resorting to confrontational advocacy would therefore damage their access to the state. Second, many of the bilateral and multilateral donor agencies also cooperate with the state. NGOs that are funded by these donors do not use confrontational strategies toward the state because, as Partnership in Indonesia points out, their donors “would not approve of it” (interview; Partnership, April 2008). Because of their frequent high-level interactions with both the international community and the state, it is not in Partnership’s interest to put both themselves and their donors in a difficult position with regard to the state. Third, donors can have their own sensitivities, like an NGO which mentioned that it was not allowed to advocate against Canadian companies because it received funding from CIDA.

The kind of strategies organizations pursue is also influenced by the process of professionalization. The Indonesian NGO ELSAM provides a good example of how professionalization of staff affects the way you work:

“Before, we had the activists from the 90s generation, but since 2000 we see a different character. [...] I think the new generation has more expertise about human rights [...] but they lack the experience of organizing the basis, like peasants, workers, or the urban poor. [...] So we have a staff which is very skilful in dealing with the government and which has very much experience in legal drafting, but they have a very limited knowledge about society.” (interview; ELSAM, April 2008).

This shows that having a highly educated staff potentially produces a bias with regard to the type of problems that are being tackled and with regard to how they are tackled. While activists might seek to mobilize the community, academics would probably prefer to organize a seminar with government officials. This bias reinforces itself because it also works the other way around. To attain a certain mission and execute a certain strategy, you need a staff which is capable of doing so. So, when your mission is to promote good governance and attain this by doing research and advocating the results at high-level seminars and roundtables with government officials, you will need to employ a highly educated staff.

## Organizational Structure and Upward Accountability

In terms of organizational structure, we do not find any evidence of the direct interference of donors. Donor dependence does have an indirect effect, however. In both Ghana and Indonesia, the dominant organizational structure is that of a hierarchical nonmembership organization. For some NGOs, there are signs that their structure is the result of mimicking peers, like the three very similar think-tanks in Ghana, or of mimicking donors, like the Indonesian NGO Partnership which mimics the departmentalization of its most important donor UNDP (interview; UNDP, April 2008). Nevertheless, this does not necessarily explain the general absence of members.

The absence of members can be best explained by our earlier observation that they are not crucial for NGO survival. This is exactly what Abantu experienced when they wanted to set up a membership-based organization:

“We tried to establish a self-sustaining membership organization, called Netright, but the membership dues could not sustain it. We had to turn to donors, and once you become dependent, the social-movement character of your organization is compromised [...] then you become more of an NGO.” (interview; Abantu, December 2007)

Another respondent explains why becoming donor-dependent causes an NGO to lose touch with its constituency:

“A lot of these NGOs rely on donors. Therefore they should be accountable to the donor who gives them money, but they should also be accountable to their constituencies. A lot of these NGOs don’t have a clear constituency, and they don’t have a strong feeling that they should be accountable to their constituencies. They are serving the donor more, and that is why they are busy with this report on good governance rather than looking at what it really means for the people” (interview; Asian Development Bank, March 2008).

It basically means that once an NGO applies for funding, the rigorous tasks of proposal writing and conforming to upward accountability standards shift the attention away from constituencies and toward donors. Democratic membership and downward accountability are not necessary for gaining access to funding or for being perceived as legitimate by the donor community. Furthermore, for their strategy of nonconfrontational advocacy, they do not need a membership. Having expertise and having the right contacts with state officials is more important for this strategy because “they [the state] need our brain anyway” (interview; PSHK, April 2008). Membership consultation and participation would not be conducive to this strategy because it is time consuming and can result in conflicting ideas about what should be done. In contrast, a hierarchic organization can decide quickly where and when to lobby politicians.

Although the lack of citizen participation and representation hardly creates problems of legitimacy in the eyes of donors, it does sometimes create problems with regard to the state. For instance, the Government of Ghana has the tendency to “always come out and say: hey, you don’t represent anybody” (interview; ISSER, November 2007). NGOs can only overcome this accusation if they manage to link up with partner

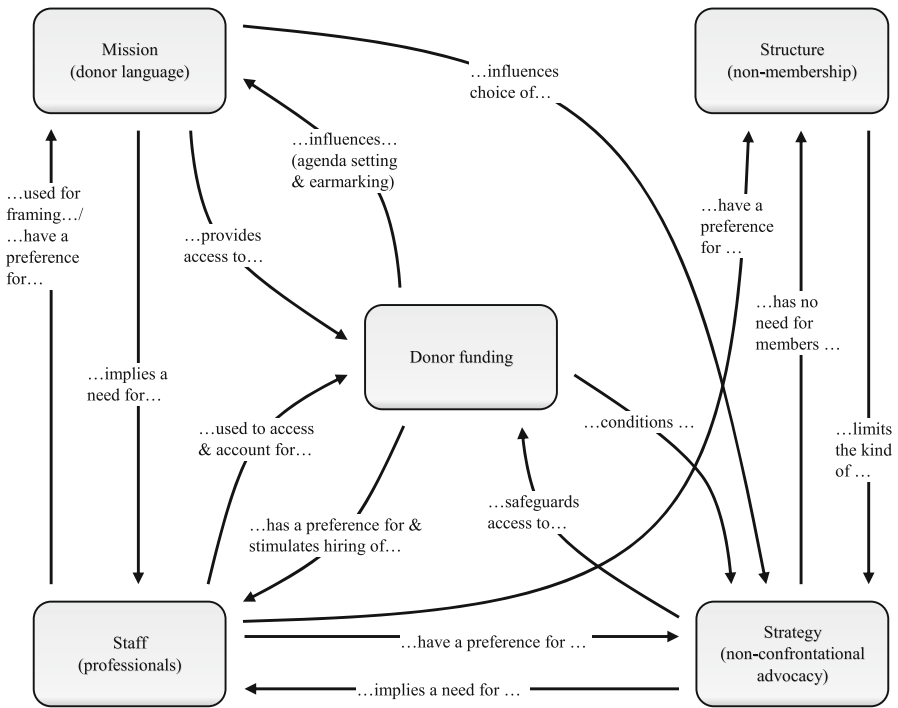
organizations and mobilize community-based organizations. Another danger comes from the upward accountability to donors, which introduces the risk that organizations become detached from their domestic political system (Sabatini 2002). This is especially the case in Indonesia: “when we talk to some government agencies, who of course sometimes still do not like us, they would say ‘You are like the agent of the USA,’ or ‘You work for the agent of Australia’” (interview; PSHK, April 2008). It is for this reason that organizations must also sometimes refuse funding or resist donor conditionalities. For instance, “USAID wanted to put their name and logo in all the publications. We said no, because if we do that, parliament members or the public will see Yappika as an American agent” (interview; Yappika, April 2008). In short, funding creates a trade-off between legitimacy in the eyes of donors and in the eyes of the state.

### **Isomorphism as the Institutionalization of Trust**

Our analysis consists of two parts. In the first part, we looked at various actors which could be important for NGO survival in Ghana and Indonesia, and we concluded that in both fields international actors (donors) have become more important than national actors (the state, citizens, and other NGOs). In the second part, we therefore focused on donor funding as the most important source of homogenization. Here, we showed the various ways in which donor dependence affects an NGO’s mission, staff, strategy, and structure.

Figure 1 provides a summary of some of the forces at work. It is important to note that it focuses on the process of homogenization of the organizational characteristics of NGOs under the influence of donor funding. Thus, it does not include some of the aspects we identified: it does not depict how strategy is also influenced by the kind of relations an NGO has with the state, how relatively small NGO communities stimulate mimicry and duplication, or how NGOs use several strategies to mitigate the influence of donors.

When we look at Fig. 1, four observations stand out. First, it shows that donor funding has a direct influence on mission statement through agenda setting and earmarking, on staff by stimulating and sometimes forcing NGOs to hire professionals, and on strategy by approving nonconfrontational strategies while disapproving confrontational ones. We have not drawn a relation between structure and funding, because we found that funding has only an indirect influence in the sense that having a membership-based organization is not necessary for getting access to funding. Second, it shows that homogenization is not only a matter of imposition by donors. On the one hand, funding conditions push NGOs to adapt, but, on the other hand, the NGOs are active actors in their quest for funding. They frame their mission statements in donor language and use professional staff to get access to and account for funding. Using nonconfrontational strategies is also a way of retaining this access. Third, the organizational characteristics also influence each other. Having the promotion of legal reform as a mission statement, for instance, requires professional staff with a profound knowledge of the legal system. Furthermore, working with professionals increases the bias for nonconfrontational strategies, which in turn reduces the need of having a membership organization. Fourth, it shows that the combination of these three processes produces multiple series of feedback loops which reinforce the process of



**Fig. 1** The drivers of homogenization

homogenization. These loops are not solely donor-driven but can also be attributed to the NGOs themselves. Furthermore, they are strengthened by the interrelatedness of the organizational characteristics of the NGOs.

Although donor funding catalyses the process of homogenization, it is the *dependence* on donors that seems to be the driving force behind these feedback loops. The coercive power of donors stems not from their own power per se but from the lack of alternative resources for NGOs. Applying for funding can be seen as the first step in the process of homogenization. Once NGOs become part of the system, there is a big chance that they will be “absorbed by this logic of industry” (interview; NGO consultant, Jakarta, March 2008). This is especially due to the process of professionalization. As the NGOs start working from modern offices with an academic staff, they also become more in need of money to pay for these things. At present, only donors are willing to provide NGOs with such money. This is how the feedback loops reinforce each other: in order to get access to donor money, you need to speak the donor language, know the donor priorities, be able to write funding reports, and preferably behave in a nonconfrontational manner. In sum, it is a self-reinforcing process which stimulates dependency rather than ownership and sustainability.

The outcome of this process of homogenization can be characterized as the institutionalization of trust between donor and recipient. It means that the more an NGO conforms to donor standards, the more it can be trusted with donor money. In many of the interviews, respondents (both donors and NGOs) used the term “trust” when talking about access to and accounting for funding. For

Partnership, for instance, “having UNDP’s name as backing has been really useful for them in getting money and getting trust basically” (interview; UNDP, April 2008). Trust of donors is something which you have to earn by building a track record. In Ghana, some of the NGOs mentioned that their donors have become more flexible over time, whereas before they were “micromanaging our things [...] it gets better when you establish yourself and develop an expertise in a certain area. They become suggestive, rather than demanding a certain outcome” (interview; CDD, December 2007). The more an NGO complies with donor standards, the more it becomes a “trustworthy” organization. As one respondent states, “I think that the trust and confidence in us also comes from our ability to conform with the standards of transparency and accountability that they [the donors] wish us to deliver” (interview; Yappika, April 2008). The bilateral and multilateral donors of the pooled funding mechanism STAR-Ghana (formerly G-rap) are quite explicit about this in their eligibility requirements for NGOs who wish to apply for funding: “[these NGOs] must demonstrate standards of good organizational governance” ([www.starghana.org](http://www.starghana.org)). Thus, conforming to the organizational paradigm which is promoted by donors makes you a legitimate organization which can be entrusted with grant money.

## Discussion

At the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the choice of supporting NGOs was a highly ideological one. Nowadays, it seems to have become a more practical one for the accountability reasons just mentioned. There seems to be a dominance of form over content. NGOs which comply with a professional organizational form almost automatically become legitimate democracy promoters. This relates to the tendency of donors to “think of NGOs as the heart of civil society”, which is “part and parcel of their ahistorical approach in this domain” (Ottaway and Carothers 2000: 295). As such, the issue of civil society and democracy promotion has been stripped of its ideological content and reduced to a rather empty organizational shell. This is exactly the kind of “one-size-fits-all development recipe” which has contributed to the term civil society becoming an empty buzzword (Cornwall and Brock 2005: 1043).

At the same time, the contradictory outcome of the dominance of form over content is that it creates room for ideological variation. Within post-development approaches, NGOs are often seen as an externally imposed phenomenon that represents a new form of imperialism (Tandon 1991). Therefore, the extent to which NGOs can really be agents for alternative approaches to democracy is open to question (Mitlin et al. 2007). In terms of democratization especially, development is dominated by a particularly Western discourse which promotes the current hegemony of neo-liberal democracy (Escobar 2007; Wright 2012). However, according to Yarrow (2011) Ghanaian NGOs should not be conflated with the neo-liberal donor policies that promoted them. While “Ghanaian activists themselves acknowledge, [that donor policies] impose certain constraints on the kinds of activities they can undertake,” these NGOs are “sustained by people with heterogeneous ideologies, often directly at a tangent to the people who fund them” (Yarrow 2011: 43). Our research seems to indicate a very similar pattern. Although the constraints of their organizational form allow for only a slim chance of radical outcomes that would create discomfort for the donor, the

focus of their work actually relates to very different views on democracy. Besides NGOs which do convey a neo-liberal interpretation of democracy (i.e., CDD and IEA), there are also NGOs which adhere to more comprehensive interpretations of democracy, like deliberative democracy (i.e., KID) and social democracy (i.e., Yappika and ISODEC). Hegemony, as such, does not manifest itself in the imposition of a dominant ideology, but rather in the imposition of a professionalized organizational form. Subsequent analysis of the Ghanaian NGOs revealed that with this dominant organizational form, they can still perform a range of different (albeit limited) democratic roles in their daily operations (Kamstra and Knippenberg 2014). Just like the “missionary position” of NGOs was not “the product of some conscious conspiracy, as was clearly the case with colonial organizations” (Manji and O’Coill 2002: 581–582), this diversity seems to be less a product of neatly interpreted—and imposed—ideologies by donor agencies, but more an unintended by-product of the dominance of form over content.

While the similarities between Ghanaian and Indonesian NGOs may indeed hide differences in their daily operation, they are striking similarities nonetheless. A better understanding of how and why they occur is therefore desirable. To improve this understanding, we should discuss some limitations of our current analysis and the implications for future research. Figure 1 should not be seen as a model which applies to all donors and NGOs in the same way. It is a summary of the various processes we encountered in Ghana and Indonesia, which, taken together, provide the first building blocks for a theoretical model on the homogenization of NGOs around the world. Further research is needed to test and refine the relations depicted in Fig. 1. First of all, it would be important to include different types of NGOs. Our findings might apply in a similar way to other types of donor-dependent NGOs, but there is also a chance that our findings are typical for democracy promoting NGOs. While the importance of grassroots and social movement types of organizations is often stressed for democratic development, they are usually not directly fighting for democratic ideals, but demand democratic participation based on the needs of their constituencies. Promoting democratic ideologies is of a different level. It could be the case that working on different interpretations of democracy mainly stems from the Western education of the elites which run these NGOs. This is basically a question of where the feedback loop starts. Have they become this way because of donor funding, or is it the particular topic which ironically shapes them as hierarchical, elite-based organizations? Both historical research on the selected NGOs and research on NGOs working in different areas might clarify this issue.

Second, future research should differentiate between different types of donors because “Every donor has their own procedures. There are donors who are a little bit flexible and there are donors who are very rigorous”, adding that “European Union partnerships are the ones who are very rigorous” (interview; Demos, March 2008). The current findings are mostly applicable to these more bureaucratic bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, as they provide most of the funding for the selected NGOs. Some of the relations depicted in Fig. 1 might change for private aid agencies or foundations. For instance, a Dutch NGO sponsoring an Indonesian NGO might be less concerned with their Indonesian counterpart pursuing a confrontational advocacy strategy against the state because they are not involved in high-level interactions with state agencies.

Third, it is important to also pay attention to the ways that local NGOs can evade donor dominance. We found that they can reduce dependence on one particular donor by seeking many, they can actively search for donors whom fit best with the mission of their organization, they can produce content which belies formal compliance, or maybe most effectively, they can search for local sources of funding. As stated before, Fig. 1 does not include these countervailing forces. Future research could build upon and refine our first findings. In this respect, the study by Elbers and Arts (2011) offers a useful framework for analyzing the strategic responses of NGOs to donor constraints.

When we focus on these bilateral and multilateral agencies, our analysis leaves donors wishing to support NGOs and democracy with a mixed picture. The NGOs are largely closed to citizen participation, led by elites, and have agendas that are influenced by international donors at the expense of local priorities and needs. This situation is not in the interest of donors (assuming they are serious about their attempts to promote genuine democracy, rather than advancing their own paradigms), nor is it in the interest of the NGOs (assuming they are concerned about the needs of their constituencies, rather than the needs of donors). However, our analysis has shown that it is very difficult to get out of the current system because it causes NGOs and their donors to be entangled in a tight grip. One way for donors to overcome this problem is to extend their funding to organizations with a different set of characteristics, which are probably less professional and would certainly be less predictable in cases where their decision making is based on membership participation. This would require flexible funding schemes with less technical accountability requirements. For these bigger bilateral and multilateral donors in particular, this would have fundamental implications for the way they organize themselves. As one bilateral donor noted,

“The strange thing about development aid is that there is a pressure to spend a lot of money in a limited time. Here at the embassy we have a comparatively big budget and a small staff to manage it. So for efficiency reasons, we channel most of our money to big organizations like the World Bank, the UNDP, UNICEF and the ADB. We do support some NGOs, but the problem is that an Indonesian NGO can never spend ten million Euros annually in an accountable way.” (interview; Netherlands Embassy, Jakarta, March 2008)

We should not forget that, in the current system, donors are also actors who depend on other actors for their survival. As one respondent noted, “if it is a country-tied donor, then the politics of that country will play a role as well. So you cannot really blame them entirely as it is taxpayers’ money” (interview; Abantu, December 2008). Therefore, a change in the way they operate would require a more fundamental change in upward accountability procedures to the parliaments of donor countries. In other words, in the short term, we cannot expect this type of donors to go beyond their current type of partners as their room to maneuver is also bound by conditionalities.

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## Appendix

### Overview of interview data

**Table 2** Overview of interview data Ghana

Organization	Type	Respondents/ interviews	Date(s)
Center for Democratic Development (CDD)	NGO	2 persons/3 interviews	November 30, 2007 December 3, 2007 December 11, 2008
Institute of Democratic Governance (IDEG)	NGO	3 persons/3 interviews	December 4, 2007 December 5, 2007 December 10, 2008
Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA)	NGO	2 persons/3 interviews	December 11, 2007 November 6, 2008 December 12, 2008
Integrated Social Development Center (ISODEC)	NGO	3 persons/5 interviews	December 6, 2007 November 5, 2008 November 10, 2008 December 12, 2008
Abantu for development	NGO	2 persons/3 interviews	December 13, 2007 November 6, 2008 November 11, 2008
GAPVOD (Umbrella organization for Ghanaian NGOs)	NGO	1 person/1 interview	November 29, 2007
IBIS Ghana	International NGO	1 person/1 interview	December 14, 2007
Netherlands Embassy	Donor	1 person/1 interview	November 28, 2007
Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD)	Donor	1 person/1 interview	January 23, 2008
Ghana Research and Advocacy Program (G-rap)	Donor	1 person/1 interview	November 19, 2007
Faculty of Law, University of Ghana	University	1 person/1 interview	November 28, 2007
Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research (ISSER), University of Ghana	University	2 persons/2 interviews	November 19, 2007
Department of Political Science, University of Ghana	University	2 persons/2 interviews	November 26, 2007 November 27, 2007
Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies (Demos)	NGO	1 person/1 interview	March 31, 2008

A total of 27 interviews with 21 respondents (one respondent works for both university and for one of the selected NGOs)

**Table 3** Overview of interview data Indonesia

Organization	Type	Respondents/ interviews	Date(s)
Centre for Indonesian law and policy studies (PSHK)	NGO	1 person/1 interview	April 3, 2008
Partnership for Democratic Governance Reform	NGO	3 persons/1 interview	April 3, 2008
Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy (ELSAM)	NGO	1 person/1 interview	April 7, 2008
Yappika—The Civil Society Alliance for Democracy	NGO	3 persons/2 interviews	April 9, 2008
Indonesian Community for Democracy (KID)	NGO	1 person/1 interview	April 10, 2008
Institute of Research, Education and Information of Social and Economic Affairs (LP3ES)	NGO	1 person/1 interview	April 4, 2008
Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)	NGO	2 persons/2 interviews	March 19, 2008 March 31, 2008
NGO consultant, Jakarta	NGO expert	1 person/1 interview	March 18, 2008
United Nations Development Program (UNDP)	Donor	1 person/1 interview	April 1, 2008
Netherlands Embassy	Donor	1 person/1 interview	March 26, 2008
Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD)	Donor	1 person/1 interview	January 23, 2008
Asian Development Bank (ADB)	Donor	1 person/1 interview	March 25, 2008
Faculty of Social and Political Science, Universitas Indonesia (Jakarta)	University	2 persons/2 interviews	March 26, 2008 April 2, 2008
Center for Population and Policy Studies, Gadjah Mada University (Yogyakarta)	University	1 person/2 interviews	March 11, 2008 March 11, 2009
Faculty of Social and Political Science, Gadjah Mada University (Yogyakarta)	University	1 person/1 interview	April 20, 2009

A total of 20 interviews with 22 respondents

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