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## Exploring the attributes and practices of alumni associations that advance social change

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## ABSTRACT

Through a multi-case study, this research explores how three higher education alumni associations organize to influence social change in Georgia, Ghana, and Mongolia. All organizations started as international scholarship program alumni associations, yet findings show they developed into social change organizations over time. In the absence of extensive financial support, these associations sustained their network based on close personal relationships among members. Targeted social issues varied by country, as did relationships with the scholarship funder. Results aim to inform those who consider how international higher education contributes to social change in low- and middle-income countries, especially through alumni networks.

## 1. Introduction

Through international student mobility, individuals gain skills, knowledge, and attitudes that can be applied to their work and engagement in their home society. The outcomes of higher education in national development are typically measured in terms of individual accomplishments and rooted in human capital theory, with a focus on the individual's role in economic productivity. However, there is an increased interest in understanding the broader benefits of international higher education and student mobility, especially in low- and middle-income countries. Beyond financial benefits, international higher education also holds the potential of shaping one's opinions of social change and human rights, building skills and knowledge related to citizen activism and civil society, and establishing international networks to address issues—like sustainable development—that transcend borders. This is especially relevant in recent times when higher education and international student mobility are viewed as strategies for global sustainable development (Campbell and Mawer, 2018; McCowan and Schendel, 2015).

One way that social change is enacted in the home countries of international scholarship recipients is through alumni associations. We define social change as societal shifts that are focused on the social, emotional, and personal development of the individuals within the society, believed to be moving towards 'progress.' Social change

includes increased attention and support for all—especially those at the margins—and often addresses issues of education, human rights, and health services.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we focus on alumni of specific international scholarship programs, although the term can include graduates, instructors and staff, and other affiliated members of an educational institution or program. Alumni associations can be defined as organized, formal networks of individuals who share a programmatic or educational affiliation.

While there are multiple frames for how international higher education contributes to economic outcomes, there is limited understanding of how alumni form and leverage their professional or personal *networks* to influence social change in their home countries. Yet is widely acknowledged that for social change to occur, social networks are essential (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Della Porta and Diani, 2006). Social change requires partnerships, exchanges of ideas, and coordinated action from many individuals that perceptively shift opinion, behavior, and values.

To investigate how alumni networks contribute to social change, we focus specifically on graduates of international scholarship programs. Scholarship alumni make a compelling subgroup as many programs have an explicit goal of contributing to social change in the recipients' home countries (Dassin et al., 2018). Moreover, international scholarships have existed for decades, producing large numbers of alumni. For example, the U.S. Fulbright Scholarship notes over 325,000 alumni

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since 1946 (U.S. Department of State, 2018) and Open Society Foundations has over 15,000 alumni since its scholarship programs began in 1994 (Brogden, 2018). To date, no comprehensive list or systematic review of these alumni associations exists.

This paper aims to explore the priorities and practices of three formal alumni associations—the Georgian Association of Social Workers (GASW), the International Fellows Program Alumni Association of Ghana (IFPAAG), and the Mongolian Association of State Alumni (MASA)—in an attempt to identify key characteristics and deepen understanding of how they contribute to social change. Findings from this study seek to inform those interested in promoting social change in low- and middle-income countries, including alumni associations themselves and existing international higher education program funders and administrators.

## 2. Review of literature

Rooted in the notion of higher education as a common good for societies (Marginson, 2016), there is mounting evidence that international higher education contributes to changing social systems in low- and middle-income countries. Multiple sources (Brown Murga and Martel, 2017; Chankseliani, 2018; Spilimbergo, 2009) highlight the contributions of individuals educated abroad to progressive economic, social, and political reforms in their home countries. These examples suggest that by engaging in quality higher education abroad and seeing examples of other political, social, and economic systems, individuals are able to “apply” their experiences and influence change at home.

This theory of change is prominent among those governments and foundations who design and fund scholarship programs, especially those which target students from low- and middle-income countries (Musa-Oito, 2018; Perna et al., 2015). Recently, Baxter (2018) made the case that international education can prepare students for social change engagement, naming various educational contributions, such as intercultural competence, global citizenship, experiential learning, and immersion in a new culture. For international scholarships, the manifestation of its idea is connected to the notion of “giving back” and how individuals and groups are addressing issues in their home communities following their studies abroad (Campbell, 2017). However, the majority of the academic literature and program evaluation on “give back” in international scholarship programs focuses on individual contributions instead of group or network efforts.

Moreover, much of the existing research on alumni associations focuses on professional networking with the goal of finding jobs and professional partnerships (Chiavacci, 2005; Hall, 2011). Some alumni networks focus on social efforts for the benefit of their members (see Hanson, 2005); for the benefit of their alma mater or host program (Chukwu et al., 2017), or for the benefit of the home country through “diaspora philanthropy” (Garchitorena, 2007). One social issue that seems to be of interest among alumni networks is supporting education. For example, alumni networks have been involved in raising funds for scholarships (Kirkland, 2018), serving as volunteers for host university events (Weerts and Ronca, 2008), or lobbying for institutional support (Weerts et al., 2010). Several scholars have argued that technology further invigorates and expands alumni networks (Farrow and Yuan, 2011). While these studies indicate the potential contributions of alumni association, further study is needed to understand the ways in which associations understand, organize, and sustain themselves in relation to social change.

In terms of higher education scholarships, Dassin et al. (2018) describe the ‘social network pathway’ as one of the means by which international higher education can facilitate social change. They argue that “networks formed by scholarship holders and alumni catalyze positive social change through collective action” (p. 5). Extant examples of alumni social networks mostly highlight a desire of alumni to work together or the potential of these networks, instead of exploring the exact nature of these groups. For example, Baxter (2018) argues

that in addition to knowledge and skills attained, “development of personal relationships and social networks...is critical in opening doors for program alumni” (p. 124), indicating that networks built during the period of scholarship study become valuable personal and professional networks for program alumni. Campbell (2016) similarly describes how scholarship program graduates identified alumni associations as “useful tools to organize and drive social and economic change” and describes other scholarship alumni as “very interesting and successful people” and “ideological comrades” with whom they would want to partner (2016, p. 80). Pérez (2012) also found that Cuban-educated scholarship alumni would often form or strengthen “solidarity groups” or friendship societies with Cuba to advance the “solidarity” movement between students and countries and present alternatives to the “market” approach to international cooperation (p. 79). Finally, Mawer (2018) identifies how scholarship programs can “facilitate clustering” to leverage the synergies that exist among alumni (p. 268) while also questioning the “critical mass” required to yield substantial gains (p. 269). As seen in these examples, there is a recognition that networks are important to facilitate change in students’ home countries, yet there are few specific details.

Research examining how networks contribute to social change suggests that groups must define and pursue a common agenda and share information across members of the network (Chetkovich and Kunreuther, 2006; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). Networks are dynamic and responsive—and above all, communicative—both to their own members as a platform through which to connect and debate and to external audiences to which they want to advocate certain perspectives. Networks can be viewed as vague and amorphous or discrete and organized; clusters of organizations that work effectively towards shared social goals become social movements (Della Porta and Diani, 2006). Networks for social change can extend beyond national borders, connecting to diaspora communities and creating transnational advocacy networks (Brinkerhoff, 2006; Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

To further understand how scholarship alumni groups may conceive of social change in low- or middle-income countries, literature on social change organizations (SCOs) provide insight on the process. As Chetkovich and Kunreuther (2006) note, SCOs are mission-driven, typically focusing on “a particular dimension of injustice” and aim for “structural change as opposed to individually oriented treatment or service provision” (p. 5). They also explain that SCO leaders often undergo “transformational learning” (p. 31) that allows the individual to critically examine beliefs and assumptions to arrive at a new point of view. Moreover, SCO leaders do not necessarily seek training to lead social change, but that their work “was informed by a blend of personal experiences, formal education, and informal tutelage by mentors and role models” (p. 61). Notably, SCOs are not the same as social movements. Social movements are not formal organizations but networks of individuals and organizations with a shared vision; SCOs are formal organizations that in some cases participate in social movements (Della Porta and Diani, 2006).

When examining how alumni associations work to advance social change, questions are raised about organizational structure, sustainability, and autonomy. Anecdotally, there are reports of alumni associations starting strong but not being able to continue their work toward social change. For example, the Institute for International Education found in a recent study of the Ford Foundation’s International Fellows Program (IFP) alumni in Latin America that “formal IFP alumni associations have struggled to coalesce and sustain themselves since the program’s conclusion in 2013, confirming difficulties cited by program staff while the program was still active” (2017, p. 28). Associations were launched in Mexico, Brazil, and other countries yet “[d]espite their geographical proximity and common origins, [graduates’] impacts have generally been individual rather than collective” (p. 29). Moreover, in a recent Australian Awards Global Tracer Study Report (2017), there was a call to research “the complexity of roles that alumni associations might be expected to play” (p. 35) in

order to understand their contributions to program goals. To better understand the contributions of alumni associations to scholarship program goals of addressing social issues in low- and middle-income countries, the following research questions guide this paper:

- In select cases of alumni associations which promote social change in graduates' home countries, how has each alumni association organized and sustained their efforts to contribute to social change?
- In these cases, what are the key similarities and differences in terms of association structure, strategies, and challenges?

3. Methods

3.1. Method and case selection

This qualitative multi-case study analyzes three cases that were purposively selected to explore the associations' engagement in social change over time. We identified the three cases in this study after conversations with approximately 10 scholarship program funders and researchers who suggested associations for this study. From the list of 15 nominations, we selected the associations based on the following criteria:

- 1 The organization was founded as an international scholarship alumni association.
- 2 The association is involved with social change activities in the alumni's home country.
- 3 The organization has existed for more than 10 years.

This final criterion reflects our assumption that longstanding organizations are likely to mobilize change in multiple ways over time and provide deeper insight on those processes. In addition to meeting the above criteria, we selected examples that reflect diversity in terms of country, scholarship host university, and field of study. Our sample also reflects variation in the size of alumni associations. These differences among the selected cases allow us to identify a range of characteristics shared among associations in their ability to work toward social change, as well as illuminate differences through comparison.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

To develop each case, we interviewed six association leaders and reviewed association documents and websites. Table 1 provides an overview of the interviewees. All interviewees are current association leaders or board members; most have been active in the associations for many years and had historical knowledge.

The interview protocol focused on questions related to association background and history, organizational attributes and membership, association successes and challenges, and perception of association's role in social change. Interviews were conducted in person or over Skype and lasted from 60 to 120 min each. In addition, we reviewed a total of approximately 35 documents and websites, both publicly available and internal documents shared by interviewees.

With these data, we wrote extended case studies (approximately 1500 words). Drawing on Stake's (2006) merged and special findings approach, we then analyzed the three cases together to identify common and distinct themes. This approach allowed us to examine the data in terms of three discrete organizations, as well as collective insight into the nature of alumni associations. Next, we developed abbreviated case summaries focusing on these key themes and sent these to the organizations to verify their accuracy. These abbreviated case summaries are presented below.

3.3. Limitations

In a multi-case study, the selection of a small number of cases is

Table 1  
Table of Respondents.

Interviewee Number	Association	Alumni Association Position	Leadership	Sex	Current Residence	Scholarship	Scholarship Host Country
Interviewee 1	Georgian Association of Social Workers	Current Leader	Current Leader	Female	Georgia	Open Society Foundations' Social Work Fellowship Program	United States
Interviewee 2	Georgian Association of Social Workers	Board Member and Past Leader	Board Member and Past Leader	Female	Georgia	Open Society Foundations' Social Work Fellowship Program	United States
Interviewee 3	International Fellows Program Ghana	Current Leader	Current Leader	Female	Ghana	Ford Foundation International Fellows Program	United States
Interviewee 4	International Fellows Program Ghana	Current Leader	Current Leader	Male	Ghana	Ford Foundation International Fellows Program	United States
Interviewee 5	Mongolian Association of State Alumni	Current Leader and Board Member	Current Leader and Board Member	Female	Mongolia	U.S. Government Fulbright Program	United States
Interviewee 6	Mongolian Association of State Alumni	Current Leader and Board Member	Current Leader and Board Member	Female	Mongolia	U.S. Government Fulbright Program	United States

**Table 2**  
Alumni Association Cases.

Name of Association and Website	Main Location	Affiliated Scholarship(s)	Date Founded	Membership Number and Type	Mission	Organizational Structure
Georgian Association of Social Workers (GASW)	Tbilisi, Georgia	Open Society Foundations' Social Work Fellowship Program	2004	675 Open to anyone working in the field of social work	To foster the development of social work profession in Georgia and seeking enhancement of the effective functioning and well-being of society.	GASW has 16 paid employees, with two boards. It applies for and administers its own and other contractual projects for outside funders.
International Fellows Program Alumni Association of Ghana (IFPAAG)	Accra, Ghana	Ford Foundation International Fellows Program	2007	106 Alumni of IFP program in Ghana	To create effective support network, build capacity, support initiatives and shape policy by raising awareness about issues of social justice.	IFPAAG has an executive committee of seven individuals, made up of IFP alumni, and all work is voluntary. Subcommittees drive the projects. The Association of African University donates office space and administrative support.
Mongolian Association of State Alumni (MASA)	Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia	Graduates of U.S. Government Scholarships (founded by Fulbright and Humphrey alumni)	2007	200+ Open to anyone who has studied in the United States	To promote democratic social development and equal opportunities across all spectrums of Mongolian society.	MASA has a volunteer board of 15 members, and all work is voluntary. Members have independent and collaborative projects. Administrative support is offered by the U.S. Embassy.

strategic to gain greater insight into the attributes and practices of these organizations (Stake, 2006). However, a tradeoff is that the study is not designed to present findings that are comprehensive or generalizable. For example, all interviewees studied in the United States and these associations have close ties with the west, so these cases may not accurately represent the diversity of associations, including alumni of universities in other parts of the world. Moreover, much of the information about the associations is shared through perceptions from and materials created by association leaders, introducing the possibility of partial knowledge or bias. Moreover, we did not seek external evidence that the alumni associations have been effective in social change, as this fell outside the scope of a study focusing on the internal processes and attributes of scholarship program alumni associations.

**4. Case studies**

Table 2 provides an overview of the three cases summarized in the sections that follow. For each association, we present a brief history, review of the organizational structure and membership, examples of association strategies for engaging in social change, and current successes and challenges.

*4.1. Georgian Association of Social Workers (GASW)*

GASW was founded in 2004 by five alumni of the Open Society Foundations' (OSF) Social Work Fellowship Program, which aimed to foster the practice of social work in Georgia and other post-Soviet countries. GASW started out as an organization aiming to establish the social work profession, in part to call attention to the existence of this relatively new profession in Georgia. As one GASW leader said of the organization's founding, "Maybe if we were in Georgia we would never network so closely, but having lived abroad, [we had] kinds of challenges that exist for foreign students. So, we became very coherent, a strong group of professionals [who] became friends" (Interview 1). Together, the alumni applied for and received an all-alumni grant of \$5000 from OSF to help establish and begin the work of creating a professional association.

While the GASW started with only graduates of a specific scholarship program, the founders soon realized that in order to affect change in policy and practice, they needed to adopt two strategies. First, they sought partnership with the relevant government ministries to offer their assistance in improving the profession of social workers (most of whom were Government employees). In many cases, this involved signing Memoranda of Understanding with the Ministries to outline the terms of their partnership. Second, they opened their membership to those who worked in similar fields, such as school principals and child protection workers. One interviewee explained that in order to have a greater influence on practice and policy, GASW "widened its door" to expand membership to include those who both formally and informally do the work of social work (Interviewee 1). Another GASW leader described how the Association invites anyone who "put[s] human rights into action" to join (Interviewee 2). This practice of inclusivity in extending membership to psychologists, educators, nurses, lawyers, and others was viewed as "the smart way to communicate our messages" and "offer the platform for discussion" to enhance the field of social work in Georgia (Interviewee 1). As of March 2018, the Association has nearly 700 registered members across the country who pay a nominal membership fee, and the original founders are still active as leaders or board members.

In 2015, GASW underwent a large-scale strategic planning process, with meetings held in all regions in Georgia. From this process, GASW realized that they had been very effective in promoting good practice of social work in the country and increasing the services to vulnerable populations. However, GASW members asked for increased attention to the working conditions of social work professionals (e.g., salary and working hours). One of the ongoing challenges for the Association is to



simultaneously balance fighting for the rights of vulnerable Georgians while also advocating for improved working conditions for professional social workers. One interviewee noted that it was important for GASW not to dilute its focus on the larger mission of promoting and protecting human rights, and to carry the conversations that are being held in their office into public forums (Interviewee 2).

Despite these areas identified for improvement, the organization has grown substantially since 2004. Today GASW has 16 employees, two boards, and administers its own and other contractual projects for funders. Among its partners are the European Union, the United Nations, and OSF. Its focal areas include anti-trafficking, improving temporary detention centers, and improving care for disabled infants within the child welfare system. In each effort, GASW consults its members to see who may be able and willing to assist with the initiative, drawing on a wide range of expertise from among the membership, with some members hired as special consultants. The Association has been able to cultivate and apply expertise in social work to deeply influence the profession and practice of ‘human rights in action’ in Georgia.

#### 4.2. International Fellows Program Alumni Association of Ghana (IFPAAG)

Beginning in 2001, the Ford Foundation’s International Fellows Program (IFP) selected scholars from “marginalized communities” with few higher education opportunities and those “who had demonstrated academic and leadership potential as well as a commitment to social causes” (Brown Murga and Martel, 2017, p. 5). When participants began to graduate from the program, the IFP West African Alumni Association founded in 2003, representing alumni in Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria. However, due to logistic complications of bringing together alumni regularly in one place, it was determined that each country should have their own association. IFPAAG was formed in 2007 yet gained steam in 2009 with an official relaunch with the theme of “Championing Social Justice” with support from the Ford Foundation and the Association of African Universities (AAU).

Since then, IFPAAG has focused on efforts to promote social justice in Ghana by providing a forum through which alumni support each other’s social change projects, raise awareness and attention on specific social issues, and build skills and knowledge among members. For example, IFPAAG held a Communications Training Workshop in 2011 that helped to enhance how IFP alumni could shape their messages to call attention to social justice issues in the media and to shape government policy. This training was just one example of an event where Ghanaian alumni had, as noted in the report to the Ford Foundation, an “extraordinary platform...to exchange ideas and forge professional networks that would ultimately facilitate their individual and collective quest to address social justice issues in their various fields of operations.”

IFPAAG hosts an annual meeting to which all Ghanaian alumni are invited; while there are 106 registered members, approximately 80 are considered ‘active.’ Several members traveling from the Northern Region attend and those living abroad often send their updates to share with the group. The conversation remains robust among group members via WhatsApp throughout the year. Members use the WhatsApp platform and other electronic communication to send personal updates (e.g., birth, wedding, and funeral announcements), job announcements and calls for consultants, and share topics and articles related to social justice and human rights in Ghana. The organization is governed by a constitution, as well as by smaller policies that provide guidance on matters, such as rules that govern appropriate content for WhatsApp.

IFPAAG leaders are volunteers who submit grants on behalf of the Association for projects that promote social justice directly and empower members to carry out their own projects (e.g., a training on grant writing). Previous projects include advocating for improved services and rights for people with disabilities and a peace forum and election observer project around the 2012 and 2016 elections. Moreover, IFP

members have demonstrated an interest in influencing policy by participating in trainings that have strengthened capacity to influence elected officials, speak to media, and educate others about the Sustainable Development Goals. IFPAAG members also respond to emergency situations; in one example, one member posted on WhatsApp about a village badly affected by a flood and several IFPAAG members helped by calling government officials to raise attention to the issue and by providing direct aid. One alumni leader stated, “as alumni, we are also doing our own, the little things we can do to champion social justice in our various communities. I see us as part of the civil societies” (Interviewee 3).

Moreover, IFPAAG members attend each other’s events and provide financial support for personal and professional activities. One association leader described that when invited to attend another member’s event, it is common for members to attend in person or send a representative. “When we go and are called out, we are loud,” she explained, demonstrating the pride of being a member of IFPAAG (Interviewee 3). IFPAAG activities include hosting seminars that facilitate interaction with alumni from other international scholarship programs, as well as supporting AAU in the Africa Research and Innovation Summit as mentors and panel members. AAU was the IFP administrative partner in Ghana and continues to lend in-kind support to IFPAAG after the IFP program closed, including donating office space to IFPAAG and waiving fees to events for IFP members. The relationship is mutual, as IFPAAG members also assisted with AAU’s 50 year anniversary in 2017, recognizing a spirit of shared goals of higher education for national development and developing leadership.

IFPAAG has a constitution, with a board of directors and working groups for various areas related to both social justice efforts and to maintaining the Association. Notably, their 2017–2022 strategic plan also includes programs geared towards the Sustainable Development Goals. IFPAAG members pay a small membership fee, and at times when specific members can’t afford the fees due to unemployment or other family burdens, IFPAAG leadership will sponsor others’ fees or travel expenses. At the time of interview, IFPAAG had no paid staff, yet the leadership hopes to find funding to hire staff in the coming years; IFP alumni noted they are quite busy with their employment and other commitments, and as volunteers, are unable to make adequate time to move the group’s agenda forward. Additional challenges include bringing together members who live outside of the large southern towns, because of time to travel and transportation costs.

#### 4.3. Mongolian Association of State Alumni (MASA)

MASA was founded in September 2007 by a small group of alumni from the U.S. Government’s Fulbright and Humphrey scholarship programs. Their goal was to share the knowledge gained while abroad and to encourage others to apply for U.S. Government scholarships. MASA is based in the nation’s capital and largest city of Ulaanbaatar, where approximately 95% (as estimated by alumni leaders) of the alumni who have returned to Mongolia live.

From the beginning, MASA worked in collaboration with the U.S. Embassy in Ulaanbaatar, where Embassy staff invited them to events and also attended MASA’s meetings. MASA members—then and now—are volunteers and receive some basic support from the U.S. Embassy in terms of providing food for meetings, allowing the Association to meet in U.S. Embassy-funded space, and helping to support the Association in a few administrative tasks. In its fifth year, MASA decided to establish a membership structure, which included removing a requirement that members had to be a recipient of a U.S. Government scholarship yet requiring that members must have studied in the United States. Currently, the organization has just over 200 members, who have paid a nominal membership fee. Notably, MASA’s activities are open to all Mongolians who have studied in the United States in short- and long-term programs (over 1000 individuals). MASA is overseen by a 15-member board, with each board serving a 2-year

term. The board sets the strategic agenda for the term, reflecting the board's interests; the agenda incorporates various projects, including a series of public talks, U.S. Embassy events, and individual and collective social change projects.

Over time, MASA incorporated into a non-governmental organization with the title of “Ambassadors for Development.” Its motto is “to promote democratic social development and equal opportunities across all spectrums of Mongolian society” (MASA, 2018). Central to this work, MASA identifies its role in promoting volunteerism and civic spirit among its members and the larger community. As one MASA leader said, “One of our biggest goals is to promote volunteerism, to show how to do it.” She continues, “It would be great if we can influence at the policy level, I don't know, put [volunteerism] in the education system. That's like a bigger picture goal we're aiming for” (Interviewee 6). They also promote and direct other volunteer projects in line with development goals, ranging from rural community development to improving rights and services for people with disabilities.

MASA has designed a strategy to collaboratively identify its social change projects. Each year members are invited to a happy hour where individuals propose their ideas for social engagement or volunteer projects. The ideas are vetted by other members, and the preferred ideas are *de facto* supported by the MASA network. Teams are formed to provide the project leaders with support, contacts, and specific skills from among the members and larger group of those educated in the U.S. Together, small teams—with other MASA members serving as support—write grants to the U.S. Department of State's Alumni Engagement Innovation Fund (AEIF). Each year, up to 20 proposals have been submitted to AEIF from among the MASA network, and at least one project has been granted annually. One example project is the Democracy Ambassadors initiative for underprivileged youth living in the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar. Through an eight-month training, youth are exposed to workshops, mentoring, project development and implementation to encourage young people to “participate more actively in civic life, increase their understanding of democratic principles, and improve their leadership skills” (U.S. Department of State, 2017). Leadership of MASA expressed an interest in using a similar structure of organizing the network to support other projects and funders—as well as collaborate with other NGOs and agencies in project implementation—but it is difficult as the membership of over 200 and 15 member board is entirely volunteer-based.

Alumni leaders note that high levels of commitment among volunteer leadership have sustained the Association through the challenges of a volunteer-based organizational structure. One alumnus leader said that alumni “are all passionate and we are all motivated to do something great for our community,” yet are short on time (Interviewee 5). Another leader added that paid staff would help move projects because:

[W]e all have our lives and full-time jobs and things going on, and [MASA] takes up a lot of our time, but we're passionate to do it. So, when you're willing to do something, you make it happen. So, so far, that's how we've been operating. But we do want to have someone dedicated, at least a part-time staff, who runs the daily operations and tasks. And how we've been handling it, is that we're divided into teams, usually [...] with two or three people in charge of each activity so it's not overloading a single person with all the tasks. (Interviewee 6)

MASA Leaders identified the organization and its structure as facilitating opportunities for U.S. Government alumni to give back on the investment made in their scholarship. One alumni leader put it this way: “I think that is one of the big purposes of the scholarship, to have those intellectuals return to the country and contribute to the community. So MASA opens the doors for them. We help them to find a project to conduct, or link them with someone, help them to network” (Interviewee 6). Another leader stated that since the U.S. Government has invested so much money in her for an Ivy League degree, she is “responsible” to help the community by influencing policy and

programs and helping to guide others who also studied in the United States (Interviewee 5).

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Common themes

#### 5.1.1. Shifting from program affiliation to social change advocacy orientation

All three associations described a transition from a group of individuals who shared a common scholarship experience to an association that sought to influence and educate those outside of their own membership. At their start, these organizations noted activities that supported the goals of—and were often supported by—the scholarship funder, such as recruiting new grantees or participating in sponsor-funded trainings. Over time, associations have focused more on activities that educate others or improve programs or practices in the larger community. Notably, these activities were selected by the association leadership, not guided by the scholarship funder. A MASA leader stated that they do not carry out the mission of the U.S. Embassy but plan their own activities; setting independent priorities was also emphasized by GASW and IFPAAG.

In addition, two of the three associations have changed their membership requirements and invited individuals who were not scholarship program graduates. GASW has opened their membership to any Georgian who works in the social service system, and MASA welcomes any American university graduate. Similarly, there is understanding of the importance of key partners and bringing together others who have similar motivations or experiences. For example, IFPAAG invites alumni from other international scholarship programs to events, because as one alumni leader put it, scholarship program alumni “are all trying to achieve the same thing in Ghana” (Interviewee 3).

In all three cases, alumni utilize the associations to ‘give back’ to their communities and apply what they learned through their higher education experience through two primary mechanisms. First, the association serves as a clearinghouse by which individuals can find opportunities or partners for social change projects. For example, MASA hosts happy hours where members “pitch” social engagement project ideas and seek feedback and partners from among the membership. The second way is that the associations act as a collective unit in responding to current events and advocating for social change. For example, in 2014, GASW organized a series of national conversations across organizations, fields, and regions to map a national network of social services.

#### 5.1.2. Nation-state orientation with transnational networks

All associations considered in this study are currently organized within national boundaries, with the main office and majority of activity happening in the nation's capital. Although one association had first considered organizing alumni across regional borders (IFP Alumni of West Africa), this organization eventually determined that a national orientation for the organization was more effective. Likewise, these three associations have established constitutions, bylaws, and strategic plans that have a national scope. They also have subchapters organized along federal district lines, such as GASW having meetings in all 11 Georgian districts (including the autonomous states). At the same time, all associations mentioned some communication or partnerships with other national alumni associations and an interest in learning from other associations both other alumni associations and other non-governmental organizations-in line with bilateral or binational projects that share common aims.

This nation-based organizational structure reflects a desire to influence national policy. The experiences of all three organizations led them to identify larger, systemic challenges to be addressed through advocacy efforts on a national level. Some associations provided examples of editing or responding to proposed policies, bringing new

items to the national agenda, and protesting specific policies or procedures. Providing trainings that could be applied to influencing policies and practices was also mentioned by GASW and IFPAAG. Notably, the associations expressed interest in policymaking that was not linked to promoting individual members to run for office or in forming a political party; in fact, it was important to the associations to retain neutrality and independence from political parties.

The associations highlighted the value of maintaining transnational networks with other national alumni association chapters, with NGOs who shared a similar social cause, and with their scholarship funders. Leaders from each association had traveled internationally to meet with other organizations, as well as receive visitors from abroad, and noted a desire to learn more from and partner with other alumni associations, while citing current limitations of time, funding, or capacity. Despite recognizing the value of these transnational networks, none of the alumni leaders mentioned, and few materials indicated, current efforts to integrate diaspora alumni. However, association leaders suggested that some overseas alumni were included in electronic communication, particularly from Ghana, and that greater inclusion of diaspora members was part of their future plans. These findings imply that associations are not actively incorporating alumni who reside abroad; likewise, many of those alumni who lived far from the national capital were less active than their urban counterparts<sup>2</sup>.

### 5.1.3. Strong social connections and support, limited time and financial resources

Across the three cases, association leaders described a strong sense of social connection and solidarity as central to their motivation to participate in association activities and ability to keep the organization afloat. For example, alumni paid out of their own pockets for association meals and supplemented project budgets, covered other members' annual dues, met in people's homes when office space was not available, and celebrated personal events like weddings and children's birthdays. This sense of friendship and camaraderie sustained the networks in the face of financial or other logistical challenges.

Towards this end, in-person meetings and events—primarily held in the national capital were viewed as the most important activities for sustaining the organizations. These in-person meetings allow board members to discuss association business, plan new initiatives, share updates on their careers and personal lives, and socialize. A variety of online platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, and listserv emails) were used to share information among members between in-person events.

Financial and in-kind support were also crucial for sustaining the membership of each group. All received initial financial support from the scholarship funder to arrange early meetings, sponsor trainings, or fund social change projects. These small grants funds were mostly given through a competitive processes facilitated by the scholarship program funder; a small grant offered the association legitimacy and early support to set a governance structure, receive training, and make initial plans. Leaders from each association mentioned that these grants were short-term and not adequate to attain the goals of the association, yet they spurred early leadership teams to consider broader fundraising strategies.

The greatest strain articulated by the associations was limited time among members to prepare proposals, seek funding opportunities, and carry out the work of grants, if and when they were awarded. All alumni leaders mentioned how their members had full time jobs, families, or other commitments that filled their time so it was difficult to expect too many hours of any one person's time to devote to the association. This in turn hindered their ability to fulfill strategic plans. Interviewees described how despite large membership bases and sizable boards, only a few key leaders—the majority of whom were

women—carried the load. Both MASA and IFPAAG mentioned a desire to be able to fund a staff person, like those in place for GASW, to support the ideas and administrative work of the association.

## 5.2. Key differences

### 5.2.1. Contextually-based focus and approaches to influencing social change

While all organizations focus on themes of social injustice, their target areas differ in response to national context and current events. Whereas the GASW aims to build a practice of “human rights in action”, the IFPAAG is drawing attention to people with disabilities and providing quality education and services and MASA focuses on promoting youth volunteerism and civic engagement among youth. These focal areas are attuned to the national challenges and policies in each country, and often reflect the values of the scholarship program as well. Similarly, the groups are highly responsive to the ideas of their individual members and try to support individual projects, which can vary in topic and approach. Budgets for each association also vary considerably, depending on the interests of the organizations funding these partnerships.

Despite the fact that all associations share an interest in influencing national policy, the strategies employed vary considerably. GASW had been active in the past by signing MOUs with government ministries to provide technical support on the field of social work practice, organizing signed petitions, and even protesting government actions. MASA specifically mentioned trying add youth service to the government's education agenda, asking to weigh in on policies and talking with members who are also elected officials. In these efforts, they often highlight American community service as an example. IFPAAG members have spoken out about providing services for individuals with disabilities and other marginalized groups, as well as speaking in favor of diverse civil society issues like safe and transparent elections.

### 5.2.2. Relationship with scholarship funder

While all three associations received initial support from the scholarship funding organization prior to becoming nationally registered organizations, each has established a different type of relationship with the scholarship funder. GASW has become a partnering organization with OSF to carry out projects related to disability rights in the country. IFPAAG has not maintained a very strong relationship with the Ford Foundation after the IFP program closed in 2013. Although some alumni received awards to implement projects from the Ford Foundation, they have not maintained frequent communication with either the New York headquarters or the regional office in Lagos, Nigeria. However, IFPAAG has maintained a strong partnership with AAU. MASA has continued to receive support from the U.S. Government in terms of an annual grant competition for alumni of its programs, and through the contribution of a percentage of the U.S. Embassy's Alumni Coordinator's time. This variance reflects the diverse alumni engagement strategies among scholarship program funders.

## 6. Discussion and implications

In considering these three associations that have existed for more than 10 years, each case is illustrative in how a group of scholarship alumni organize themselves and influence social change in the home country. While the target areas of social change and the ways the groups addressed social change activities differed, each association educated others on concepts and policy alternatives, and ushered in reforms and practices to address social change in their home countries. Other similarities across the three cases include that all groups shifted their orientation from a group that supports the scholarship program to one that takes action on social issues, and organized themselves in line with the nation-state, including attempts to influence national policies. Importantly, relationships among the members were essential to keep

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that Accra, Tbilisi, and Ulaanbaatar are both the capital of and largest cities in their countries.

the association active and to overcome the financial and time limitations that face these groups. These findings will be explored more in depth below.

### 6.1. Associations as social change organizations

This study illustrates several ways in which scholarship alumni evolve to resemble the social change organizations (SCOs) defined by Chetkovich and Kunreuther (2006) as “small, independent, nonprofit organizations engaged in efforts to make systemic changes” (p. 2). Like SCOs, these alumni associations aim to influence social injustice through the committed leadership of those passionate about social change: This includes both those who had received a scholarship abroad and other association members who had not. Moreover, the alumni leaders spoke about how their educational experiences abroad did not necessarily teach them to lead organizations; instead, the education allowed them to gain new perspectives and ideas, and like SCO leaders, this “transformative learning” allowed them to challenge the status quo at home. A group of these individuals with similar educational experiences can band together to influence systemic social and policy change. To varying extents these organizations also resemble transnational advocacy networks in the ways they communicate with similar social change initiatives both within their countries and abroad (Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

However, these alumni associations in low- and middle-income countries also challenge two of the definitions prevalent in Chetkovich and Kunreuther’s overview of SCOs. First, in contrast to the focus of SCOs on localized communities and grassroots organizations, these three associations operate on the national level, with membership across the country and a particular interest in influencing national policies. All were initially funded and supported by international donors. Second, the personal relationships among the members of these associations are credited with allowing the associations to remain active, especially during times of little funding. SCOs focus primarily on the issue, with frequent turnover of staff and volunteers.

The similarity between alumni associations that advance social change and SCOs extends the understanding about the outcomes of higher education, especially in low- and middle-income countries. It also challenges popular conceptions of alumni associations as chiefly valuable for the purposes of university giving and individual networking.

### 6.2. Implications for alumni associations and scholarship program funders

Alumni association leaders expressed a strong desire to learn from the activities of other scholarship alumni organizations engaged in similar work. This research illuminates several practices that other associations may wish to consider as they determine how to organize themselves to advance social change. For example, these associations identified opening their membership to facilitate engagement with others involved in specific social change movements as a beneficial practice. Moreover, association leaders may also benefit from research and tools related to SCOs. For example, Chetkovich and Kunreuther (2006) found that SCO leaders were interested in developing skills in participatory practices, supporting staff members doing transformative work, balancing organization needs with collaboration, and movement building. This suggests that materials used by SCO leaders may be helpful to build and sustain alumni associations, and vice versa. As influencing national policy is an important priority among organizations working toward social change, it also suggests that policy advocacy is a valued topic for scholarship program funders to address when designing trainings for alumni.

Finally, the research points to the fact that groups are sustained through the personal relationships among the members living in the home country, so attention on building social cohesion among nationals is valid and useful, especially as a response to structural limitations

typical of volunteer alumni associations. Hiring staff helps associations to address these challenges and move strategic plans forward. In-person meetings appear to be the most useful for building the cohesion of the group as well as influencing project planning and implementation, with online communication allowing members to share news and new opportunities. An ongoing challenge for alumni associations is to fully incorporate and integrate diaspora members into their organizational structure and work. Funders may also wish to provide start-up and ongoing administrative grants to alumni associations to support these activities and consider supporting projects spearheaded by both program graduates and their non-alumni members who are devoted to tackling larger social change efforts.

## 7. Conclusion

The cases examined in this study provide valuable insights into how alumni associations enact social change—an outcome that is rarely identified in the scholarly research yet is practically important for the goals of international higher education. They highlight how despite their diverse priorities, alumni associations similarly adopted a national focus when taking on social issues in local contexts. Efforts to influence social change were sustained through strong relationships among group members that allowed associations to persevere despite financial and time limitations. These findings suggest the importance of drawing on the experiences of nationally-oriented social change organizations to inform the existing alumni associations and scholarship programs in diverse contexts.

Future research in this area could considerably add to the knowledge about alumni associations and their role in social change and other development goals. First, building on these findings to include more associations—especially a more diverse subset—is a logical next step to understand the frequency and range of activities and procedures that alumni associations employ to advance social change. Future research could also illuminate the inner workings of the associations, especially connecting how close relationships are formed during study abroad (Baxter, 2018), are maintained and expanded when individuals return home, and influence social change activities. Further, there could be investigation into alumni networks that exist across national boundaries and those which actively include expatriate alumni, building on “diaspora philanthropy” research (Garchitorea, 2007). In addition, given a demonstrated interest in policy reform, it would be worthwhile to understand the extent to which alumni associations are linked to global advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

Moreover, these findings bring forth several new horizons for inquiry. First, what role do the host universities play in supporting overseas alumni associations that aim to advance social change, especially in terms of higher education’s role in community engagement internationally (Jacob et al., 2015)? Second, how does the availability of technology influence these findings in terms of founding associations, building connections among members, planning activities, responding to specific events, and shaping policies? Future research on these topics has the potential to advance our knowledge of effective alumni organizing for social change outcomes worldwide.

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