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Relevancy of NGOs in Social Advancement: Experience in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The socioeconomic development of Bangladesh has been greatly aided by NGOs, which have filled important service gaps left by the government. NGOs have expanded into healthcare, education, microfinance, disaster relief, women's empowerment etc. with a vibrant presence. NGOs have a significant presence in 78% of villages and employ more than 1.5 million people, indicating their extensive reach and power. Despite this, concerns about their applicability continue due to issues with governance, and increased donor dependency. NGOs are criticised for their insufficient accountability systems and for putting donor agendas ahead of local needs. Nonetheless, their efforts to combat gender inequality, promote community empowerment, and meet basic human needs demonstrate their continued significance. This study focuses on the functions of NGOs by analysing their effects on underprivileged groups, the difficulties presented by altering donor priorities, and their reaction to the evolving socio-political environment. The study has been conducted based on secondary data which are various research papers and reports regarding operations of both national and international NGOs in Bangladesh. The results emphasise that although NGOs continue to play a significant role in social change, it is imperative to guarantee their sustainability and accountability. NGOs may keep promoting significant social change in Bangladesh by lowering their reliance on outside funding, encouraging local collaborations, and keeping an eye on participatory development.

INTRODUCTION

NGOs have developed as a “development alternative” by asserting that they provide superior methods to combat poverty and inequality (Lewis & Kanji, 2009) and compensate for state service deficiencies. The links that NGOs have with the grassroots enable them to develop innovative and experimental programs for social transformation (Bebbington *et al.*, 2008). According to Fakhri (1995), the primary objective of NGOs has always been to bring about social transformation, which can be defined as the construction of significantly improved economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental institutions.

NGOs are present in 78% of Bangladesh's villages, making it the country with the highest NGO density in the world. According to the Bangladesh Department of Statistics, there are over 26,000 NGOs that employ 1.5 million people and provide services to millions of patients. NGOs are the foundation of Bangladesh's social growth strategy, and since 1971, NGOs have been instrumental in its socio-economic transformation. NGOs today focus on issues connected to healthcare, education, microfinance, agriculture, employment, and the empowerment of marginalised people (Hassan, 2015). NGOs were crucial in assisting war-torn persons in their early recovery. NGOs in Bangladesh face a variety of challenges that hinder their ability to function effectively and continue existing. A significant problem is the government's surveillance and regulation, which has led to allegations of political activity or corruption against certain non-governmental organisations (Islam, 2016).

A significant number of donor organisations are giving initiatives headed by the government higher priority than those led by non-governmental organisations, which creates an additional barrier. After doing an in-depth analysis of the administration of NGOs in Bangladesh, Chowdhury (2022) concluded that NGOs have become too focused on service delivery, and they have neglected their primary objective of empowering communities and accomplishing social transformation.

NGOs have been instrumental in reshaping Bangladesh's social elements; nevertheless, the extent of their influence and the number of NGOs remains debatable. This paper investigates the role that NGOs (both international and local) play in social change in Bangladesh. It does so by analysing the impact that NGOs have on various sectors and the work that they do with marginalised populations. Additionally, it investigates the debate that exists regarding the priorities of NGOs' donors and the impact that shifting socio-political and economic environments have. The objectives of the current study can be better understood by studying the research questions that are presented as below.

- How does the presence of the NGOs relate to the socio-economic profile of Bangladesh?
- What is the role that NGOs have played in Bangladesh's societal transformation over the past few decades by meeting fundamental human needs?
- Through what means have NGOs in Bangladesh been able to successfully engage with underserved communities to advance community empowerment and participatory development?

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- What are the impacts of changing socioeconomic conditions, donor goals, and funding methods on the operations and sustainability of NGOs in Bangladesh?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies have demonstrated how NGOs contribute to constructive social change, and the importance of NGOs in bringing about positive change has been acknowledged. Analyzing the facts makes it possible to evaluate the significance of NGOs in a country's social transformation process.

Is it possible for non-governmental organisations to be beneficial to all nations in the same way? We can answer the issue by relating the influence that NGOs have on the state of development in the territory. For this reason, NGOs may be able to make a greater impact in nations that have a greater need for the services that NGOs provide. According to Bebbington (2004), governments in poor or under-developed countries frequently lack the resources and skills necessary to provide their citizens with fundamental services such as healthcare, education, and other essentials. NGOs in underdeveloped countries may have a greater impact there due to a lack of resources and a weakened bureaucracy (Lewis *et al.*, 2020). By facilitating access to needs, encouraging community participation in development, and campaigning for policies that benefit the most vulnerable elements of society, NGOs have the potential to be a driving force behind social change in nations that are on the path to becoming less developed (Bebbington, 2004). According to this, the socioeconomic profile is directly tied to the impact that NGOs have.

To bring about positive change in social transformation, NGOs might operate in a few important areas. In the first place, NGOs make a contribution to social transformation by meeting fundamental human needs including healthcare, education, and disaster aid, particularly in regions where the services provided by the government are inadequate or inaccessible (Fakih, 1995). Additionally, Chowdhury *et al.* (2020) focused on the same topic and emphasised that NGOs have the potential to have a positive impact on the economic and social development of disadvantaged communities by addressing fundamental human needs within those communities. In addition, the empowerment of communities is yet another important method by which NGOs contribute to the development of society. The joint efforts of NGOs have the potential to enhance the capacity of local communities to participate in decision-making processes, engage in advocacy, and run their development programs with more efficiency. According to Hickey and Mohan (2004), NGOs can empower communities through the development of capacity, the formation of partnerships, and networking. As an illustration, NGOs in Ethiopia have been collaborating with the government and several other organisations to achieve sustainable development and combat poverty. In addition, it is of the utmost importance to analyse the methods that NGOs employ

to promote social transformation. This is because NGOs have the potential to bring about social transformation as well as a society that is more equitable and just through their lobbying efforts and awareness-raising efforts. Lobbying, public campaigns, and networking are all ways that NGOs might participate in advocacy, according to Edwards and Hulme (1995). One way to determine whether or if NGOs are necessary in a certain region is to examine their involvement in providing fundamental human necessities, bolstering disadvantaged groups, and improving governance.

Nyangosi *et al.* (2016) stated that NGOs were created to support the government's attempts to offer social services, programs, and sustainable development to its citizens. NGOs have arisen in both developed and developing nations to help address the state's inability to provide development and services to all of its residents. The promotion of good governance and the equal and fair distribution of government goods and services to the poor, marginalised, and disadvantaged in society can be achieved through the complementing efforts of NGOs and interest groups. In the agenda for development and service delivery, the state and civil society must support and enhance one another's efforts. NGOs first appeared in Africa in the 1980s when Western governments, donor organisations, and international financial institutions began to transfer some of their aid from African governments to civil society (Somolekae & Molomo, 1999). Without a doubt, the state can no longer be the only supplier of goods and services due to the growing demands of the populace. One of the factors contributing to the growth of NGOs in the new millennium has been recognised as the government's poor performance in addressing the socioeconomic needs of its constituents. Accordingly, Wahab (2000) noted that, up until recently, citizens in developing countries relied on their governments to provide their fundamental socioeconomic needs.

When it comes to bringing about beneficial social transformation, the success of NGOs is also dependent on some external variables that may render the actions of NGOs superfluous. The priority of the donor is of utmost importance here. As a result of the competitive character of the market for financing, their strategies need to be by the priorities and interests of the donors (Elbers & Arts, 2011). Donors in Malawi have made HIV/AIDS their top priority, which has resulted in the reduction or elimination of other goals, much to the annoyance of the numerous NGOs in the country. According to Banks *et al.* (2015), international NGOs tend to gather in countries that are home to donors. This adds to the "donor darling-donor orphan" division and helps to sustain it. NGOs can face challenges in many developing countries due to the presence of political instability, war, and violence (Ager & Strang, 2008). Furthermore, it is possible that foreign NGOs do not possess adequate knowledge of the local context, which may encompass the political, social, and economic climate. There is a possibility that this will lead to a lack of ownership over the process of development

as well as anger on the part of the community.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study uses a qualitative research approach to investigate the role of NGOs in social transformation in Bangladesh. By utilizing a methodology that emphasizes the lived experiences, institutional dynamics, and social influence of these organisations, NGOs can provide a comprehensive knowledge of their contributions and problems.

Qualitative Research Method

Due to this study's qualitative character, it is possible to conduct an in-depth investigation into the role that NGOs play in tackling socio-economic concerns and empowering marginalised populations. This approach makes it easier to comprehend intricate social phenomena, such as the dynamic that exists between NGOs, communities, and external parties like donors and the government.

Analysis of Secondary Data Only

One of the most important aspects of this research is the analysis of secondary data. Reports, academic articles, and official documents from reputable sources such as the Bangladesh Department of Statistics, reports from NGOs, and international organisations (such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program) were examined to gain an understanding of historical trends, operational strategies, and the socio-economic impact of NGOs. The main data source is various research articles that conducted studies regarding the impact of NGOs. Reports of regulatory authority, UNDP and World Bank were given priority too. These papers were selected considering relevancy to the research objectives of the present study. Data was analysed considering research questions designed earlier and trying to find the answers. Here various numerical data helped to understand the context of the study showing multiple facts. The conclusions of the qualitative research are given context and quantitative support by these specific facts.

This study evaluates NGOs' current efforts in important fields like healthcare, education, microfinance, and community empowerment. It examines case studies and reports to assess the efficacy of these initiatives in addressing fundamental human needs and fostering participative development. When NGOs engage with communities, they pay attention to how they do so and whether or not their activities correspond with their stated goals of social transformation and empowerment.

Thematic Analytical Tool:

To uncover recurrent themes, difficulties, and opportunities associated with the operations of NGOs, a thematic analysis was carried out.

Among the fundamental ideas are NGOs' role in combating poverty and injustice, engaging the community and empowering participants, priorities of donors and the systems of funding, socio-political and viability of

NGOs. These themes were extracted by analysing the data obtained from secondary sources. The results of this process provided insights into the accomplishments and limitations of the efforts made by NGOs in Bangladesh.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of NGO's Operations in Bangladesh

It is estimated that there are 26,000 registered NGOs in Bangladesh. These organisations include local, national, and international entities (Chowdhury, 2022). By the end of the fiscal year (FY) 2019-20, the amount of foreign grants that were distributed to NGOs in Bangladesh had climbed to approximately \$990 million. With the help of empirical facts, one can have a clearer understanding of whether or not NGOs (both local and foreign) continue to be a significant force in furthering social reform in Bangladesh. Based on several pieces of literature, we can look for answers to a variety of research questions that were developed specifically for this study.

In what ways does the presence of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) relate to the socioeconomic profile of Bangladesh?

According to Bebbington (2004) and Lewis *et al.* (2020), and other empirical researchers, it is abundantly obvious that NGOs have the potential to make a significant contribution to the process of bringing about social transformation in a developing nation such as Bangladesh. The poverty rate in Bangladesh is approximately 20%. Because rural areas have less access to resources and chances for economic growth and employment, they are more likely to be affected by poverty than urban areas. One further significant issue is that a significant number of people in Bangladesh do not have access to medical care, educational opportunities, clean water, and sanitation facilities (Basher & Hasnat, 2022). Projects that aim to advance economic progress and alleviate poverty are being hampered by the pervasiveness of corruption, which is acting as a barrier to the success of these projects. It is also possible for the public to develop feelings of mistrust and disillusionment. Chowdhury (2022) contends that NGOs, particularly international NGOs in Bangladesh, play a significant part in the achievement of the goal of developing good governance, community development, and democracy that functions effectively, as well as in the reduction of poverty. Bangladesh has been experiencing rapid growth with a population of 160 million people, a population density of 1265 people per square kilometre, a per capita income of \$2815, and 40% of its rural population is dependent on agriculture. Even though Bangladesh has a high population density, limited resources, and a poor income scope, NGOs are however able to make a significant contribution to the country's efforts to bring about social change.

In what ways have NGOs contributed to the transformation of society by meeting fundamental human needs?

The contributions that NGOs provide to various critical

areas, such as addressing basic human requirements like education, health, employment generation, food security, and family planning, are a better way to define the impact that they have on social transformation. This issue is examined in the theoretical framework. First, we can evaluate the importance of NGOs in the field of education in Bangladesh. The goal of NGOs in Bangladesh is to eliminate illiteracy among children, particularly among females. BRAC, which is one of the most prominent NGOs in Bangladesh, operates a satellite school system that is based on informal education and educates approximately 10 million children (Hassan, 2015). According to the same report, to improve human capital with marketable and technical skills, many NGOs on both the national and international levels provide funding for functional education programs. Second, NGOs have been making contributions to the health sector in Bangladesh, particularly to disadvantaged people. The government of Bangladesh was not able to solve health concerns on its own, therefore, a large number of local and international NGOs launched and implemented a variety of health programs in Bangladesh. This was done to address health challenges and achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). A significant NGO in Bangladesh, for instance, launched a state-wide health campaign with three thousand branches, through which one million people receive health information on an annual basis (Hassan, 2015). In addition to educating millions of people about sanitation and hygiene, numerous NGOs assist the impoverished in the construction of latrines. Healthcare for pregnant women and children, vaccinations, and treatment for infectious diseases like as tuberculosis and malaria are all provided by non-governmental organisations (El Arifeen, 2013). Third, Marie Stopes Bangladesh and other charitable organisations provide contraception and healthcare for pregnant women, which has led to a reduction in the rate of maternal death. In addition, women living in rural and urban slums in Bangladesh have access to family planning services that are offered by national programs and NGOs. These services include in-home counselling and the distribution of contraceptives, as well as motivational activities, reproductive health care, and surgical procedures (NGO Affairs Bureau, 2023). NGOs in Bangladesh are working to provide food security in addition to their efforts in the areas of health and education. To improve food security, NGOs collaborate with the government to produce, distribute, and market high-quality seeds and research new varieties. For example, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) provided funding for CARE-Bangladesh to carry out one of the largest non-emergency food security development programs in the world (Hassan, 2015). There are NGOs in Bangladesh that are contributing to generating employment opportunities and improving living standards. NGOs are assisting the rural poor in increasing their incomes by encouraging people to work and by developing rural areas through the implementation of a variety of strategies, policies, and methods. Despite

this, they provide individuals with financial assistance and management support, which results in the creation of new jobs. Those who receive assistance from non-governmental organisations have more access to resources such as loans, marketing, training, production inputs, and so on (Jakia *et al.*, 2020). Youth have also received vocational training that is relevant to the job market from non-governmental organisations. As an illustration, NGOs such as Swisscontact Bangladesh and YPSA have imparted skills such as tailoring, carpentry, and information technology, which have resulted in marketable employability abilities.

When it comes to fostering community empowerment and participatory development, how have NGOs in Bangladesh been successful?

Women in Bangladesh made up 49% of the population and in the past, they were mostly active in activities related to the household. The active engagement of women in all aspects of society and the economy is crucial to the achievement of long-term, balanced development. This is because women make up over half of the population. NGOs and government development partners have collaborated to eliminate gender inequality and empower women. Hassan (2015) notes that NGOs have organised activities that provide revenue for women, such as apiculture, needlework, silk production, fishnet mending, poultry, and cattle, to improve their socioeconomic situation. Development initiatives are also carried out by NGOs, such as fostering economic growth, raising awareness, and organising women to empower them (Zafarullah & Nawaz, 2019). The government of Bangladesh is also collaborating with a variety of NGOs to ensure the empowerment of women and inclusive development. Under the social protection plan known as the Vulnerable Women Benefit Project, for instance, the BRAC non-governmental organisation collaborates with the government to educate poor women living in rural areas to provide them with training and enable them to become self-sufficient. Through the empowerment of the rural poor and the development of their organisation through education, awareness, and resource mobilisation, NGOs are working to democratise power relations. As a consequence of this, they organised the poor to take part in village decisions such as the “Salish” and local elections, among other things. The goal of NGOs and civil society is to provide citizens with a voice in the policymaking process. Amnesty International, Transparency International Bangladesh, and the Centre for Policy Dialogue are some of the organisations that audit government services in Bangladesh to promote good governance. NGO is one of the vibrant groups that monitors elections and the media (Hassan, 2015).

To what extent do NGOs in Bangladesh contribute to the transformation of society, or do they merely serve their interests?

According to Haider (2011), Bangladesh is home to hundreds of NGOs that have expanded as a result of

international donations and humanitarian aid. These organisations have been able to better deal with natural disasters and benefit from abroad sponsorship. According to Basher and Hasnat (2022), the policies and functions of NGOs have been subjected to criticism as a result of their performance and effectiveness, accountability and autonomy, commercialisation, and political figure shelter for project procurement. NGOs in Bangladesh are wholly reliant on external funding, and to receive funding, they are required to adhere to the policies of donors, even if they harm society and administration. According to Hashemi (2014), they compel the people to be willing to provide money, which may be against the law. NGOs can fail to identify those who are impoverished and to deliver social assistance to vulnerable communities. The evidence reveals that NGOs have barely reduced rural poverty or supplied loans to severely poor persons, even though Hassan (2015) stated that NGOs claimed to have been successful in primary services and the reduction of poverty. Global pressures resulted in the expansion of NGOs in terms of both number and scale, as well as the creation of their public image and the recognition of their functions by the government. This resulted in a change in the power structure and arrangement between the government and NGOs in Bangladesh. Some NGOs in Bangladesh function similarly to corporations, and others are expanding their rural networks to connect with their producers and consumers. Instead of assisting those who are in need, many NGOs generate enormous profits for themselves. According to Hassan (2015), several NGOs in Bangladesh collaborate with well-known organisations from other countries, and these NGOs now exert influence over a significant number of internal affairs in Bangladesh. It is a major cause for concern for the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector that certain national and local NGOs are governed like family businesses by “bosses” who make arbitrary decisions. On occasion, the executive committee will make decisions on its own. They can freely operate their organisations without being subject to regulation. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) reports that as many as 85 percent of governing bodies are comprised of relatives, and 95 percent of them do not adhere to procedures (Chowdhury, 2022). If these concerns are not adequately addressed, then the existence of NGOs in Bangladesh will not result in any societal reforms; rather, it would merely increase the number of NGOs.

Key Findings

In this study, an attempt was made to challenge several disputes concerning the ultimate influence of NGOs in Bangladesh and to analyse the requirement of NGOs to bring about social reform in Bangladesh. As a result of the theoretical framework and the discussion regarding the operations of NGOs in Bangladesh, it appears that NGOs continue to be a significant force in bringing about social reform. This remark can be better explained by referring to the findings that are presented in the

following paragraphs.

- It is one of the key reasons that NGOs are required in Bangladesh because the government does not possess sufficient expertise and resources. Despite the efforts made by the government to address social and economic challenges, there are not sufficient resources available in the country to satisfy the requirements of the majority of its citizens. NGOs can fill this void by providing essential services and programs that the government is unable to provide.

- In addition, NGOs have helped the government in its efforts to advance development and eradicate poverty by addressing disadvantaged communities, filling gaps in service delivery, and addressing the needs of marginalised people. There is a strong correlation between the socioeconomic composition of Bangladesh and the existence of NGOs in the country, and the continuous efforts of these organisations would be essential in resolving the problems that the country is currently facing.

- Sen (1984) asserted that the fundamental job of the government and other development agencies is to provide individuals with the conditions they require to actualise their potential. This is following the capabilities approach. The NGOs have made a substantial contribution to Bangladesh’s continuous development and balanced economic trends, in addition to the help that the government has provided. It is important to recognise their work, particularly during the past twenty years (Islam 2016).

- Since the unemployment rate is a key concern for the government, one of the most notable contributions that NGOs have made is the creation of jobs for educated labour force members and women who are underserved. To bridge the gap left by the failure of the formal financial sector to provide financial services to the underprivileged through the creation of employment opportunities, the alleviation of poverty, and the redress of gender inequality, the World Bank expresses satisfaction with the work that NGOs have done to provide microcredit in Bangladesh. These organisations are viewed as efficient and effective delivery systems for bridging the gap (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2020).

- Several further problems need to be solved before moving forward. The viability of initiatives and operations carried out by NGOs over the long term is one of the primary concerns. There are a great number of NGOs in Bangladesh that are heavily dependent on the unexpected and erratic funding provided by donors. NGOs are susceptible to shifts in donor objectives and patterns of financing because they are dependent on money from outside sources (Hashemi, 2014). Despite this, the non-governmental organisation (NGO) gradually increased its resources, which resulted in a decrease in its reliance on funding from other sources. According to Chowdhury *et al.*’s 2020 research, the percentage of overall funding that came from donors reached its highest point of sixty percent in 1996 and then dropped to one and a half percent in 2016.

These findings underline the fundamental arguments in favour of the establishment of NGOs in Bangladesh to promote social advancement within the context of the socioeconomic factors that are already present in the country.

CONCLUSIONS

Bangladesh has a lot of reasons to be proud of its “Development Puzzle” label, which is a label that acknowledges the significant contributions made by NGOs (Chowdhury *et al.*, 2020). Bangladesh’s rapid economic growth in recent years and improvements in social indicators, such as a lower population growth rate, greater food security, lower infant mortality rate, higher literacy rate, higher primary school attendance rate, women empowerment, and elimination of gender disparity, among other things, give the country great cause for pride. Over the past four decades, NGOs have played a significant role in providing support for government programs and augmenting the efforts of the government, corporate sector, civil society, and development partners in improving key factors that determine socio-economic growth. Even though NGOs in Bangladesh were initially run on a voluntary and non-profit basis, they have now demonstrated that they are important to the poor, traditionally disadvantaged, and underprivileged female population of the country. In Bangladesh, NGOs constitute an exceptionally significant third sector in terms of their role in promoting national and social development. The sector’s mission is to improve the economic and social well-being of the poor and the seriously poor, who are typically ignored by both the government and the corporate sector. This is the sector’s primary objective. Therefore, NGOs continue to play an essential role in the process of social transformation in Bangladesh.

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