NGOs and civil society

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Non-Governmental Organizations and Civil Society

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Introduction

Like many so-called developing countries, Bangladesh has attracted a wide range of international NGOs mainly from Western countries that have worked on disaster relief, welfare and development issues. But what is perhaps unusual has been the scale and influence of the country's home grown or indigenous NGO sector. This phenomenon is the result of a complex set of factors, including Bengal's long and varied traditions of community organization, religious charity and political resistance. This wider sphere of organized citizen action, which to some extent underpins the country's modern NGO sector, came during the 1990s to be characterized as civil society. As we shall see both the NGO sector and the idea of civil society have been controversial subjects during the past 40 years of the country's history.

In the field of international development, two organizations in particular have come to loom large in both the local and the international public imaginations - BRAC and Grameen Bank. Now one of the world's largest NGOs, and having expanded in the past decade into an international relief and development agency, BRAC symbolizes the potential of the multi-dimensional NGO with its steady growth, comprehensive coverage, careful management, diverse impacts and international influence. Grameen, also very large and influential, is a completely different type of organization. With its pioneering work on group-based credit services provided to rural women, it has evolved over the years into a pioneering social business seeking to propagate the idea of enterprises that aim to meet social rather than for-profit needs. It has generated widespread interest within the development industry and among the Western (and particularly the US) public, and has helped to consolidate Bangladesh's position as the home of microfinance. These two organizations are however far from typical, with the vast majority of the country's NGOs small and local. By 2014, the government's NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) website was listing a total of 2,203 registered NGOs.[1]

Despite the numbers, and the high level of attention NGOs have received, the sector in Bangladesh has not been particularly thoroughly researched or well understood. In this chapter we briefly trace the evolution of the NGO sector in Bangladesh, consider what has been achieved, and also offer some grounded speculation on where the sector may be going.

Historical evolution of NGOs

Approached historically, the NGO sector can be understood has having two main types of roots. The first, as we have seen, is in local forms of voluntary organization and action. Villagers have long carried out public works to establish schools or maintain mosques, and undertaken relief work in times of natural disaster, to which Bangladesh

has always been vulnerable. Each of the country's different religious communities have also engaged in forms of charitable work such as the Islamic duty of *zakat*, in which one fortieth of one's income was given to the poor, or the Hindu tradition of giving food to *sadhus* and *faqeers* (Zaidi, 1970). Village based self-help groups, such as the Palli Mangal Samitis (Village Welfare Societies) became common from the 1930s onwards, and were encouraged by local administrators to promote local good works and to build patronage relationships. Some of these over time took on more formal structures and grew into organizations that today would be termed NGOs. Christian missionaries too brought charitable education and health initiatives to some areas of the country, along with early forms of community development work that were later to characterize the work of many local development NGOs.

The second set of roots can be found in Bangladesh's relationship with the international aid system. While some NGO founders – or social entrepreneurs in today's parlance - were locally resourced, many others built productive relationships with foreign organizations with similar aims and values. Sometimes these were primarily resource-driven relationships where NGOs were established as vehicles for foreign assistance so that it could be utilized locally in effective, flexible and timely ways. But in most cases these relationships went further to include forms of international solidarity and the exchange of ideas and values. In the 1970s, for example, the ideas of Brazilian educator Paolo Freire became influential among a sub-group of Bangladeshi NGO leaders who favored working directly with disadvantaged people using alternative grassroots political mobilization approaches to development. In these early years NGOs could access funding from international NGOs and foundations that were largely independent from the mainstream development establishment – including Canadian University Services Overseas (CUSO), Oxfam, Ford Foundation and Diakonia (Kabeer et al, 2010).

The need for humanitarian response was crucial in shaping the NGO sector, just as it has been in many other countries. The War of Liberation and the subsequent humanitarian disaster caused by a devastating cyclone were formative events in the evolution of the modern NGO sector. 1971 was the culmination of political struggles that had begun with Bengali mobilization against British colonial rule, and then after 1947 the growing opposition to West Pakistani rule. It reflected a long history of state/society struggles in the country. At the center of these struggles had been traditional forms of civil society organizations and movements that took the form of associations of students, lawyers, journalists, cultural activists united by the idea of Bengali nationalism, democracy and secularism (Hashemi and Hasan, 1999).

In the new country the large-scale nation building effort that soon got underway attracted not just foreign aid organizations and funders but it also mobilized Bangladeshi activists and social entrepreneurs locally and internationally. This trend towards local ingenuity and organizational innovation was also accelerated by the fact that the new government's development work while committed and energetic was limited in resources and imagination and by the scale of the problems it faced. There was an emphasis on the clientelistic extension of local government structures through which to funnel development resources into local communities, a reliance on trickle-down economics to improve rural livelihoods, and innovative but ultimately half-hearted attempts to build village level co-operatives for farmers. In practice the state remained weak in terms of its capacities to provide social welfare, maintain an independent judiciary or collect taxes.

As a result, there was considerable space for NGO efforts to emerge alongside those of government. Nevertheless, relations between NGOs and government have been characterized by periods of turbulence as well as cooperation. They have perhaps tended to work better during the military era when government lacked legitimacy and sometimes sought out opportunities to send out a pro-people message (the *khas* land and essential drugs examples discussed below both date from the Ershad period) or when partnership has taken place in the context of donor-funded projects as Alam (2011) has analyzed in the case of the Urban Primary Health Care Project. At other times, government has taken repressive action against NGOs, such as the case of the Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity that lost its registration in June 2010 (eventually regaining it after three years of legal action) after government unfairly accused it of inciting unrest among the workers of the country's highly lucrative export garment industry.[2]

NGOs were also attractive to activists who were inspired by progressive political or developmental agendas, but who did not wish to enter formal political institutions, especially as these gradually grew more bureaucratic and authoritarian during the 1970s. Political influence could also be achieved in other ways, such as challenging mainstream development models through grassroots organizing and empowerment approaches, which began to attract some people from the country's fragmenting leftist political groups. For example, BRAC's influential research study *The Net* (1983) was a political economy analysis of rural power relations that focused on the persistence of semi-feudal village level structures that it argued held back mainstream approaches to local development. It upheld a radical structural analysis of poverty that challenged political clientelism and trickle down, and highlighted the predatory activities of local landowning elites who captured development resources at the expense of the poor.

NGOs were also the preferred vehicles for other types of activist: those with a less political and a more welfare-oriented approach who instead favored the prioritization of meeting people's needs by filling gaps in public services. As a result many NGOs took on the management of service delivery work as their main business. These organizations aimed to complement rudimentary provision or substitute for absent or inadequate government provision in health, family planning, education and agricultural services. Many NGOs did not see the idea of NGOs substituting for the services that government was expected by people to provide as a sustainable option, but instead viewed it as meeting a short-term need. They aimed to simultaneously build better government services through demonstrating possible approaches and stimulating public demand. In this way service delivery and policy influence and advocacy were often linked activities rather than separate spheres.

In the health sector, the work of Dr Zafarullah Chowdhury in establishing GK as a people's health movement was particularly significant. This NGO promoted a cooperative approach to sustainable health services based on settling up village health centers staffed by paramedics. The organization also campaigned for an essential drugs policy, which brought it into conflict with the multinational pharmaceutical companies and with the Bangladesh Medical Association, a professional civil society organization in part funded by the companies. However, many of the mainstream service delivery NGOs were open to the criticism that rather than contributing to sustainable improvements they merely 'let the government off the hook'.

Civil society

The discourse of civil society provided a new rationale for NGOs. During the 1990s the concept of civil society, revived from its relative dormancy within political theory, began gaining currency in the context of the NGO sector. This was in part linked to trends in development policy, where a new policy agenda began combining ideas about privatization of the state and a stronger role for private actors such as NGOs, and an interest in NGOs as agents of democratization with the potential to provide voter education and human rights training. The interest in civil society had connections with wider global democratic debates. For example, in the context of popular struggles against authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and Latin America there had been renewed interest in radical ideas about civil society influenced by Antonio Gramsci. By contrast in the United States, the work of political scientist Robert Putnam (1993) on the idea of 'social capital' emphasized its role in democratic functioning as well as reflecting anxieties about a perceived loss of community-level trust in communities in the US. All this fed into the re-emerging idea that civil society was an associational space between market and state that was essential for building and sustaining liberal democracy (echoing Alexis de Tocqueville's classic *Democracy in America*), since it provided a countervailing force against state and corporate power, individual self-interest, and primordial ties of patronage and kinship.

As indicated earlier, the history of civil society in Bangladesh requires us to distinguish between older and newer traditions of civil society in the form of longer histories of social movements and the newer modern NGOs (Lewis, 2004). At the same time, the actual and perceived boundaries between state and civil society have constantly shifted and blurred. For example, such blurring is apparent in the ways in which elements of 'old' civil society were absorbed into the post-1971 state, and in the ways in which many modern NGOs may remain linked to government and other institutions through family ties, contracting relationships and an often overlapping dependence on foreign donors (Lewis, 2011a).

In the development industry, agencies also began pushing the idea of civil society as part of 'good governance' agendas. These were also linked to the rise of neoliberal restructuring processes of developing country institutions that emphasized the private sector and the third sector as a balancing force against the state. The 'civil' in civil society also for a while took on meaning in the context of Bangladesh's post-military government era after 1990, when General Ershad had been removed from power, in part by a popular movement. The term 'civil society', sometimes translated into Bengali as *shushil shamaj*, which literally means 'gentle society', also gained some traction within public debates among NGOs and activists in Bangladesh, even though its meanings and emphases were continually debated and disputed. The term meant different things to different people, and this was no doubt also part of its attraction. Many within the NGO community embraced the idea of civil society as part of their own quest for credibility, since it offered a concept that embedded the idea of NGOs within established political theory and provided theoretical justification for their role, and further localized the NGO discourse by giving non-state actors legitimacy in relation to the state and downplaying their links with the international aid industry. The term also sat well with the more radical political agendas of certain NGO leaders,

some of whom set about seeking to construct alliances between civil society groups such as to mobilize citizens around political or social objectives.

Organizations, activities and achievements

As we have seen, the NGO sector in Bangladesh is normally characterized as diverse. It encompasses both large and small entities, and contains organizations that undertake both service delivery and those working on social mobilization, policy advocacy or campaigning work. It is sometimes argued that this broad diversity makes it difficult to make general characterizations of the sector, but in this section we try to provide some of the broad brushstrokes of Bangladesh's NGO narrative. At the same time, many would also acknowledge that this diversity has declined over the years. Although service delivery NGOs still remain active in health and family planning, primary education and agriculture the majority have over time come to be involved in some form of credit provision. There are still NGOs that are involved in community level social mobilization and wider advocacy and campaigning work. But there is widespread agreement among observers of the NGO sector that its diversity has significantly narrowed with the result that service delivery mainly dominates the sector, and that within service delivery the core business of most NGOs is now some form of microfinance provision.

Thumbnail sketches of the some of the key organizations that have stood out offer a sense of the dimensions and activities of the NGO sector in Bangladesh. As we have already seen, BRAC has become one of the world's best-known development organizations. It was established in 1972 by international oil company executive Sir F.H. Abed, an expatriate Bangladeshi eager to play a role in addressing the difficult challenges faced by the new country. BRAC was initially an organization that aimed to provide short-term disaster relief and rehabilitation responses to communities. Over time, it grew and evolved into a community development organization that provided a range of services. BRAC undertook innovative large-scale work in relation to immunization, oral rehydration, maternal health, and non-formal education that has made a significant contribution to key areas of Bangladesh's human and social development. It also provided credit services, and it developed a strong emphasis on providing small loans to female borrowers (Smillie, 2009).

Muhammad Yunus' Grameen Bank began as an action research project in 1976 and lent small sums to rural people organized into joint liability groups, gradually focusing primarily on women as its main borrowers. It was transformed by government legislation into an independent not-for profit bank in 1983. Like BRAC, it has grown steadily and over the years has changed and expanded its approach. It now offers a wide range of financial products to its six million borrowers, though it has these days abandoned its joint liability approach and compulsory savings (Yunus, 2010). Professor Yunus was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2006.

In contrast to these internationally known organizations, another section of the NGO community placed a stronger emphasis on political and social mobilization at the center of their organizational identity and work. Proshika dates from 1976 when a group of student activists who had been working on building community level social change among landless groups formalized it as a registered NGO, its name based on

an amalgam of the Bengali words for training, education and action. At the height of its power and influence during the mid-2000s, the organization had around 2.8 million borrowers within a borrower-managed savings and loan program, combined with skills development and 'conscientization' efforts. However, in 2001 the NGO began encountering political problems with a newly elected government that alleged it had provided political support to the opposition and it has subsequently declined. Nijera Kori - which means 'by ourselves' - began life in the 1970s and was initially a small relief organization among many at the time. It became more distinctive when it was revitalized in 1980 and given a new direction by dissident BRAC staff who were exploring ways to challenge what they saw as the creation of dependency by service delivery approaches. With a more radical agenda, the organizations eschewed the idea of microcredit altogether and focused instead on training and mobilization. In line with ideas about civil society and democratization, NK also emphasized democratic relationships with members of the community and within its own organizational structures. It established a system in which members elect representatives to make decisions at each level of the organization (Kabeer et al, 2010). Another radical NGO Samata was first established as a youth organization in 1976 that aimed to organize landless people to claim ownership rights over unoccupied *khas* land. This is unowned but highly fertile farmland that becomes available due to changing river systems and coastlines and is immensely valuable in a land-scarce environment. *Khas* land was seen as providing a potentially important asset for the country's large numbers of rural landless households.

The more progressive or alternative sources of international funding that had been available to NGOs began to decline by the end of the 1980s. In their place was a new neoliberal development agenda that quickly gained ground among mainstream bilateral and multilateral funders. This ideology supported the role of NGOs in development, but placed most of its emphasis on the priority of official donors providing funding to NGOs as private service delivery providers as alternatives to the state. The basic trajectory of the sector at this time is perhaps best epitomized by the Association for Social Advancement's (ASA) organizational journey, although this particular NGO was probably driven more by its own organizational imperatives rather than those of donors. ASA had been set up in 1978 as a social activist organization that was based on a structural analysis of poverty and an empowerment agenda. But when results proved slow to achieve the organization moved away from the mobilization approach to a service delivery approach with credit at the center, adapted from the Grameen Bank's model (Rutherford, 2010).

The availability of large scale funding from bilateral donors did not altogether by-pass the more radical NGOs. Agencies such as Proshika, Samata and GSS were each heavily funded by Britain's Department for International Development, for example. However, the shift towards an NGO contracting culture contributed to a proliferation of NGOs, many of which were inexperienced, small and opportunistic. There were 395 NGOs registered with the government's NGOAB in 1990, and 1223 by 1999. By the end of the 1990s, almost three quarters of all donor funds were going to just three NGOs: BRAC, Proshika and ASA (Devine, 2003). Today, Bangladesh's overall economic position has changed, with relatively high levels of economic growth and international remittances that have displaced the earlier centrality of aid to the economy. For NGOs to achieve sustainability, the most viable options have arguably become microfinance provision with its built in management fees or the hybridization

of NGOs into social businesses able to generate revenue from market based activity and corporate philanthropy.

The contribution of NGOs to Bangladesh society and economy are difficult to assess but they are significant. As Amartya Sen has argued, women-focused service delivery, microcredit services and social mobilization work by both large and small NGOs in Bangladesh has made an important contribution - alongside major efforts by the government - to the country's achievements in reducing poverty and moving forward social indicators (Sen, 2013). This is one of the reasons why Bangladesh, considered a 'basket case' by some international observers during the 1970s, today boasts social indicators that are superior to Pakistan and some Indian states (Lewis, 2011b).

Beyond service delivery, NGOs have also played a role in influencing policy in some key areas. NGOs alongside a range of national and international policy actors played an important role in helping to ensure that the 2009 Right To Information Act was passed and implemented (such as Transparency International Bangladesh), in challenging the top down approaches to climate change adaptation that has at times been being pushed by some areas of government and donors (Action Aid Bangladesh), and supporting labor rights for garment workers (Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity) and laborers in the shipbreaking industry (Young Power in Social Action).

One of the best-known historical cases of shaping policy is in relation to land rights. NGOs have been instrumental in shaping a land reform policy that enshrined the right of landless households to *khas* land. As a result of a concerted NGO campaign in the latter stages of the military regime of General H.M. Ershad, a new land reform law was passed that required new *khas* land to be redistributed to landless households (Devine, 2002). Landless people need to be able to formalize their rights over this land and begin cultivation, since local landowners often occupy it illegally and achieve de facto ownership in defiance of the reform. In 2008, a research report indicated that the total amount of *khas* land amounts to around 1.3 million acres, of which about three quarters of a million acres have been redistributed to poor households.

By the end of the 1990s, some organizations within Bangladesh's NGO community embraced the concept of civil society as part of social mobilization and policy influence agendas, as well as their own quests for identity and legitimacy. A few NGO leaders began trying to construct alliances between more diverse sections of civil society in order to mobilize citizens in support of political or social objectives. For example, another large NGO at this time Gono Shahajjo Sangstha (GSS) promoted some of its rural landless group members as candidates in local union *parishad* (sub-district) elections (Hashemi, 1995). In 2001, with the *Oikabaddo Nagorik Andolan* (United Civil Society Movement) Proshika and other civil society groups including trade unions mobilized more than half a million people with a comprehensive set of demands to government on democratization, poverty and human rights.

While international linkages and relationships have always helped to shape the NGO sector, more recent forms of globalization have arguably contributed to an intensification of local grassroots action. The concept of 'global civil society', made possible by the growth of communications technology has helped to facilitate

international activist networks around the world. An environmental movement had barely existed in the 1980s, in Bangladesh but gained momentum during the 1990s, partly through building alliances internationally and locally in relation to the popular opposition to the controversial Flood Action Plan (FAP), a donor-backed infrastructural megaproject that proposed a top down solution to water control management (see Lewis, 2010).

The rise of NGOs has not been popular among all sections of the population. Critical voices have been raised in relation to many aspects of NGOs and their work. First, some see NGOs implicated in the rolling back of the state. Between 20 and 35 per cent of the country's population is believed to receive some services, usually credit, health or education, from an NGO (World Bank 2006). In line with the growth of neoliberalism, the state is seen by critics such as Wood (1997) as discarding its responsibilities for service provision and citizen accountability then it 'franchises out' key state functions to NGOs and private agencies. When the government outsources its responsibilities to non-state actors that have unclear lines of accountability to service users (and may often also be mainly foreign-funded) this weakens the state-society relationship.

Second, NGOs have been criticized by interest groups and members of local communities. For example, NGO work in rural areas has occasionally generated violent resistance, such as between local religious leaders and followers, and NGO field staff. For example, BRAC field workers and schools have sometimes been attacked (Rahman, 1999). Some suggest that this is a sign that NGO programs that challenge local gender norms such as female literacy and education are gaining traction. For others, this is evidence of clashes between the forces of local religious conservatism and NGOs as purveyors of Western modernity. Such incidents may also relate to disputes over patron-client relations or land-related conflicts. NGOs are convenient targets, perhaps by threatening established interests or by positioning themselves as 'new patrons' (Devine, 1998). Some critics on the left also attacked NGOs engaging in social mobilization during the 1990s for weakening the efforts of political party-led forms of rural protest.

Third, the narrowing of NGO work to service delivery and to microfinance in particular - arguably the neoliberal development approach *par excellence* - has attracted criticism from those within and beyond the world of development who call for broader conceptions of poverty and disadvantage, and recognition of the need for forms of structural change. The reduction of development from a complex set of structural problems around poverty and inequality to ones that simply required the provision of financial services serves as an example of what Schwittay (2011) has called the 'financialization of poverty' and has helped to create an NGO monoculture. Broader critics of neoliberal governmentality such as Karim (2014) also point to the role of microfinance in coercing households and particularly women into market relations of indebtedness.

There have also been those who criticize the idea of civil society, some because NGOs became equated with civil society and crowded out the wider range of other actors, and others because the concept itself lacks precision or contextual appropriateness. In particular, the liberal view of a 'good' civil society has often been contested, since relationships in contemporary civil society may reflect wider

'uncivil' social tensions. It is also generally unwise to assume - as liberal accounts of civil society tend to do - a simple dichotomy between civil society and the state, between kinship communities and civil society, or between vertical and horizontal ties (Chandhoke, 2002).

Wood (2009) has suggested that there was also an 'unstated secular consensus' in relation to civil society that began to change in the 1990s with the emergence of a new urban middle class. This new middle class (mainly in Dhaka, but also in other regional cities) has been influenced both by the growing economic and cultural influence of the Gulf states on Bangladesh and by the BNP's traditional leaning towards more Islamic definitions of what it means to be a Bangladeshi. The result has been a subtle shift in the secular-religious-nationalist composite that underpinned Bangladesh's cultural and political fabric. This new middle class is increasingly an oppositional formation that is distinct from older established more secular elites that originally underpinned key sections of the intelligentsia, civil service and NGO sector during the 1980s and the 1990s.

Conclusion

Looking back, we can highlight three distinct stages of evolution of the NGO sector. The first is the period of *emergence and early formalization* during the 1970s and much of the 1980s, which saw the crystallization of the modern NGO sector in the form of a wide range of organizations from service delivery to advocacy, run by both activists and individual social entrepreneurs. The second is the period of *opportunistic growth* during the 1990s that coincided with the discovery of NGOs by the wider development industry and the growth of funding availability. Many NGOs expanded their operations, hired more staff, and built smart offices. This reflected a new found confidence and importance, including in some cases closer links with government, but it also contributed to the organizational collapse of some key NGOs, revealing an overall lack of sustainability and vulnerability to institutionalization capture and patronage client structures. Finally, there has been in the twenty first century a *marketization and hybridization* of the NGO sector. The dominance of credit-based approaches to development and government sub-contracting reflect a financialization of development and an increased reliance on private sector ideas and approaches.

As we have discussed in this brief overview, NGOs have been dynamic actors with important achievements in both service delivery and policy influence. However, despite the large numbers of NGOs that still operate today, the creative heyday of Bangladesh's development NGO movement has probably passed. The majority of organizations operating around the country are small contracting organizations. While many may do important and useful work these NGOs are variable in quality and sustainability, and most lack the dramatic organizational histories that characterized many of the large and influential NGO players that were active in the 1990s. Radical organizations do still exist of course, but they are smaller and less powerful, even though many of them too achieve useful things. BRAC of course remains, but has these days evolved into a social business across many fields – including banking, tertiary education and retailing. Its leadership generally prefers to distance itself from - rather than embrace - the term NGO.

The reduced profile of the sector has also been hastened by the declining relative importance of foreign aid, a public loss of confidence in the organizational accountability and governance of NGOs after too many corruption scandals, and the increasing levels of organizational hybridity (that is symbolized by the example of BRAC) that characterizes the diverse emerging relationships between markets, the state and organized citizens in the early twenty-first century. NGOs broadly defined and with all their strengths and weaknesses remain important actors within any society. They reflect both the aspirations of citizens and the effects of global power structures as these intersect with national and international policies and ideologies.

Notes

[1] See NGO Affairs Bureau (http://www.ngoab.gov.bd/, accessed June 2, 2014).

[2] See Clean Clothes Campaign (http://www.cleanclothes.org, accessed June 2, 2014).

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