



PULTE INSTITUTE
FOR GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

New Challenges for the 21st Century: Do NGOs in the Global South have a future?

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Chowdhury co-founded "Bangladesh Education Watch" and "Bangladesh Health Watch," two civil society watchdog organizations. He also serves on many boards, including as a senior fellow for the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, a senior advisor for the South Asia Centre at the London School of Economics, past president of the Asian Action Alliance for Human Resources in Health, advisor for Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises, and advisory member for Last Mile Health, a Boston-based non-profit that partners with governments worldwide to provide primary healthcare to remote communities. Chowdhury is widely interested in global development, especially in poverty alleviation, equity, education, population, health & nutrition, women's empowerment, empowering NGOs, and climate change.

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Ray Offenheiser served as the inaugural William J. Pulte Director of the Keough School's Pulte Institute for Global Development. A widely known nonprofit leader and innovator with a broad range of international development experience in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, Offenheiser served as president of Oxfam America for 20 years. Under his leadership, the agency grew eightfold and repositioned itself in the United States as an influential voice on international development, human rights and governance, humanitarianism, and foreign assistance. Prior to joining Oxfam, Offenheiser represented the Ford Foundation in Bangladesh and the Andean and Southern Cone regions of South America. He has directed programs for the Inter-American Foundation in Brazil and Colombia, and he has worked for the Save the Children Federation in Mexico. At the 2012 G20 Summit, he was appointed by the Obama administration to represent civil society interests on the leadership council of the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa. Offenheiser has served as honorary president of Wetlands International, and he was a co-founder of the ONE Campaign, the Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network, and the Food Policy Action Network. He has served on the advisory boards of the World Economic Forum, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Aspen Institute, the World Agricultural Forum, the Gates Foundation, the Clinton Global Initiative, Harvard Business School, the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, and Cornell University.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 NGOs IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Since the first official use of the term Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in Article 71 of the United Nations Charter in 1945, several organizations and authors have proposed diverse definitions for it (Lewis et al., 2020). The United Nations, for instance, defines an NGO as “any non-profit, voluntary citizens’ group which is organized on a local, national or international level.” (United Nations, 2024). Malena (1995) refers to NGOs as non-state institutions that address the well-being of underserved people and their environment. NGOs are also defined as organized private entities that seek to advance the good of people in their line of work without any intent to profit from their activities (Salamon & Anheier, 1992; Gordenker & Weiss, 1995; Vakil, 1997).

The different definitions highlight the various NGO organizational compositions and levels, the miscellaneous roles they play in society, and the welfarist principles underpinning their work. NGOs are mission-driven private actors, independent from governments and business, designed to enhance people’s lives and living conditions, especially for those living in poverty. This creates a unique niche for NGOs and makes their efforts complementary to governments and the private sector, adding to the level of support available to people within the areas they operate. When the state and markets are unresponsive to the needs of the population, NGOs often step in and play critical roles, earning them the title of “third sector of development” (Lewis, 2010).

When the UN introduced the term NGO, there was little emphasis in describing them as development-focused organizations. At best, NGOs acted as “stop-gap” institutions that aided society only occasionally (Banks & Hulme, 2012). Governments were then the primary development actors and were the sole responsible agencies for meeting citizens’ needs and ensuring socio-economic progress (Kajimbwa, 2006).

The narrative began to change in the late 1970s. During this time, major changes took place across the world. States, especially in the West, embraced neoliberalism over welfarist values (Banks & Hulme, 2012). In the Global South, many countries gained independence and started navigating challenging dynamics under their new status. Other countries implemented structural adjustment policies recommended by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to address entrenched economic crises (Kajimbwa, 2006). Unfortunately, these policies only worsened conditions of poverty and inequality and increased the mistrust of donors in Global South governments due to rampant corruption and lack of institutional capacity (Lewis, 2010). In such a troubled and fast-changing context, NGOs rose in prominence as more honest and reliable alternatives to governments in the delivery of essential services to citizens. As Masoni (1985) wrote, the Global North “turned to NGOs out of pragmatic considerations, seeing them as more efficient conduits for development inputs than the often discredited official (government) agencies.”

Having established NGOs’ historical background, this paper seeks to lay out the current context of NGOs working in the Global South, including the various challenges that threaten their existence in the 21st century.

2. NATURE OF NGOs AND THEIR RELEVANCE

NGOs in the Global South are commonly distinguished based on geographical location or origin, religious affiliation or inspiration, and size. In terms of origin, Global South NGOs are classified as international or local. According to Consolo (2021), international NGOs (INGOs) are established in the Global North but operate abroad. They include, for instance, Oxfam, Doctors without Borders, International Rescue Committee, Action Aid, CARE, Save the Children, World Vision, and Plan International.

On the other hand, van Zyl et al. (2019) define a domestic NGO as “an organization that is managed by locals, i.e., people from the population or community the organization serves and focuses on alleviating developmental challenges faced by the community.” According to this definition, local NGOs consist of grassroots actors who seek to pursue social change in their communities. In the Global South, local NGOs are numerous and often operate only within their national and local contexts. According to Thomas (2022), there are about 10 million NGOs across the world — many of which are local and operate in the Global South.

NGOs in the Global South are also typified by size. They can be considered *big* or *small* depending on their staff numbers, global presence, budget, scale, and variety of projects. INGOs are often classified as big NGOs, while domestic NGOs are termed small. This is, however, not a rule of thumb, as the terms big or small do not necessarily describe the true level of impact NGOs generate through their work. Some of the most innovative and impactful interventions in the Global South are implemented by local NGOs.

In certain cases, some NGOs may start as local NGOs in their countries of origin and later grow an international presence. For instance, Plan International started in 1937 in Spain as an NGO committed to improving the well-being of children affected by the Spanish Civil War. Starting in the 1940s, it began extending its services to Europe, Asia, and eventually all over the world (Plan International, 2024). Another example is BRAC, which focused on providing humanitarian relief to Bangladeshi refugees after the 1971 Liberation War before expanding its development work to other Asian and African countries (Hossain, 2013).

NGOs that operate in the Global South may either be faith-based or secular. Ferris (2005) defines faith-based NGOs as those whose funding, governance, and modus operandi are linked to a particular religion, such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, or Judaism. Faith-based NGOs may be formed by religious institutions (e.g., churches) or, in other cases, may only be inspired by religious principles in the delivery of their development assistance or humanitarian services. Examples of NGOs

operating in the Global South include Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church, Islamic Relief Worldwide, and the Ramakrishna Mission. Secular NGOs, on the other hand, operate with no religious history or affiliation. Their motivations to assist the underserved derive from liberal commitments to equity, social justice, and human dignity (Leurs, 2012).

Regardless of the classification of NGOs working in the Global South, they remain significant agents of development and change. They have frequently stood out as implementers of development programs, projects, or initiatives. Banks and Hulme (2012) argue that NGOs are crucial in providing quality healthcare and education to people experiencing poverty in many developing countries. Batley and Rose (2011) note that NGOs have been critical in setting up schools and providing underserved children with access to education in South Asia. Pfeiffer (2003) highlights the critical role of NGOs in healthcare delivery. The World Health Organization (2001) and Chowdhury and Perry (2020) have stressed the importance of NGOs in influencing health policy, supplying basic healthcare services, and improving health infrastructure in the Global South. In low-to-middle-income countries, NGOs are important actors in executing multiple initiatives to reduce poverty among local communities (Roy et al., 2017). Such efforts attest to NGOs' role as active contributors to socio-economic development in the Global South (Brass, 2016).

Box 1: Partners in Health, Extending Free and Quality Healthcare to Impoverished Populations Through Local Participation and Advocacy

Partners in Health (PIH) is a non-profit health organization started by Paul Farmer, Ophelia Dahl, and Jim Yong Kim, motivated by their desire to extend quality health services (especially tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS treatment) to underserved communities in Haiti. Despite their best intentions, they faced significant obstacles, including resistance from health experts and political establishments who

deemed their efforts overambitious and costly. Nonetheless, PIH navigated challenging circumstances, drawing on support from Haitians who were trained as community health workers. Together, they administered free anti-retroviral medication to ailing patients while challenging global powers and the status quo through advocacy. Soon after, they began saving lives while their work empowered beneficiaries to push for equity in HIV/AIDS healthcare. Their unflinching resolve led to initiatives such as the Global Fund and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief to save millions of lives from HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis-related deaths globally. Today, PIH has replicated its community-based and equitable healthcare delivery model in 11 countries.

Sources: Bending the Arc (2020) and Partners in Health (2022)

NGOs have evolved to accommodate other roles apart from implementers of development projects. NGOs like Oxfam, Global Witness, and Transparency International have increasingly become advocates of good governance and accountability. They often call out governments when they deviate from their declared commitments. Keck and Sikkink (1998) argue that, in Latin America, many NGOs¹ have joined transnational advocacy networks to protest and compel authoritarian regimes to end human rights abuses. In African countries like Kenya, local NGOs have pressured and held governments accountable for making good on policy reforms to improve agriculture, water supply, land tenure, and gender equality (Brass, 2016).

Furthermore, NGOs are involved in empowering vulnerable groups in the Global South (Morgan, 2016).

Inspired by Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*,² many NGOs use education to help vulnerable groups become conscious of oppressive social structures, embolden them to challenge the status quo, and acquire competencies to overcome unequal power structures and relations within their local communities. Upward social mobility among women in 1970s Bangladesh owes much to the Freire-inspired groundwork of NGOs like BRAC, Proshika, Gonoshasthaya Kendra, and Friends in Village Development (FIVDB). Oyelude and Bamigbola (2013) also cite how the Women Inspiration Development Centre, a Nigerian NGO, equips women with knowledge on social issues and helps them build self-confidence to navigate experiences of domestic violence. In the absence of these NGOs, such women could become lifelong victims of unjust social systems.

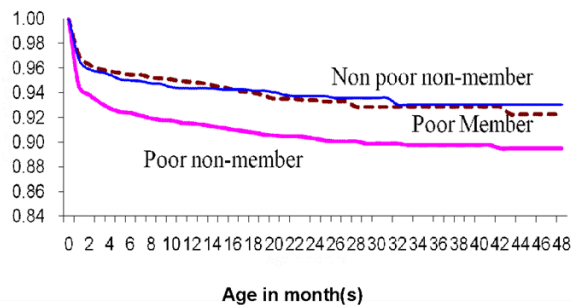
Box 2: Impact of BRAC's Microfinance Program on Child Survival

As an anti-poverty organization, BRAC offers microfinancing as one of its programs, providing financial assistance to those living in poverty (BRAC, 2020). A study carried out in the Matlab sub-district of Bangladesh, where the International Centre for Diarrheal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR, B) has maintained demographic and health surveillance program since the early 1960s, documents how BRAC's microfinance and child schooling interventions have resulted in significant gains in child survival. As Figure 1 shows, children of poor members of the microfinance program have similar survival probabilities as non-poor non-members and better probabilities than poor counterparts who are not enrolled in the program. Currently, BRAC's development programs operate in 12 African and Asian countries.

¹ Examples of NGOs that operate in transnational advocacy networks in Latin America include Oxfam International, Human Rights Watch, Amazon Environmental Research Institute, and Global Witness. Their works center on human rights abuses, violence, and repression, as well as climate change.

² The pedagogy of the oppressed, as conceptualized by Paolo Freire, implies attempts to empower people through education to enable them to liberate themselves from tyrannical systems (Trifonas, 2018).

Figure 1: Cumulative probability of child survival by membership of BRAC's Microfinance Program in Matlab, Bangladesh, 1988-98



Source: Bhuiya et al. (2001)

A growing number of NGOs, such as Oxfam, CRS, and BRAC, are actively advancing knowledge in the development sector and adopting evidence-based approaches through research (Walden, 2013; Chowdhury et al., 2014; Catholic Relief Services, 2019).³ Lokot and Wake's (2021) study also shows that there are partnerships between scholars and NGOs in the coproduction of knowledge to improve outcomes within the humanitarian sector. Similarly, Giuliani et al. (2019) and Chowdhury et al. (2014) reveal how NGOs contribute to research to show impact or enhance national programs in developing countries like Vietnam and Bangladesh.

3. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FOR NGOs

Although NGOs play important roles in promoting development within the Global South, they have also been the subject of considerable scrutiny. While some criticisms have stemmed from differing ideological perspectives, others have been related to serious programmatic and operational deficiencies and scandals.

3.1 CRITICISMS AGAINST NGOs

One of the major criticisms against NGOs has centered on instances of intervention ineffectiveness. Smillie (1997), Reimann (2005), and Schmitz et al. (2022) indicate that

NGO projects have encountered a lack of local ownership and failed sustainability. They also report that many NGO-led initiatives tend to break down within a short timeframe after the withdrawal of implementing NGOs, mainly due to the end of project funding and the absence of local capacity to sustain them. For example, Matsa et al. (2023), in their study in the Tonga communities of Zimbabwe, found that NGO or donor-led development projects quickly declined upon the exit of implementing NGOs due to the failure to build long-term local institutional support into the projects from the outset.

Closely linked to the previous criticism are voices against NGOs with a top-down structure. Mubita et al. (2017) and Kabati et al. (2021) note that INGOs are fond of designing and implementing projects with little beneficiary involvement or participation. Thus, even well-intentioned projects tend to overlook context and barely reflect the daily experiences of recipient communities, rendering the interventions ineffective in addressing their real needs.

Some of the more severe criticisms against NGOs relate to the conduct of their staff. Vijfeijken (2019) reports that NGO staff have received accusations of abusing target beneficiaries due to power asymmetries and existing vulnerabilities. In other situations, criticisms against NGO staff have noted the harsh working conditions they impose on their local employees (Avula et al., 2019). This is obviously a paradox, as certain NGOs advocate against abusive labor relations.

NGOs have also been criticized for becoming overly bureaucratized and commercialized, which goes against the ideas guiding the earliest NGOs. Reimann (2005) notes that NGOs have become increasingly hierarchical and corporate due to internal pressures to grow and expand their operations and compete for funds from donors. Critics believe these trends are gradually eroding the voluntary character, value-based approach, horizontal power structure, and grassroots culture that were key to NGOs' attractiveness and success in their early days.

³ This is explored further in an article by Perrin, Chowdhury, and Gyasi (forthcoming) on the institutionalization of research and learning cultures in NGOs.

3.2 CHALLENGES FACED BY NGOS

While NGOs in the Global South strive to address problems that affect vulnerable individuals, local societies, or even international communities, they are sometimes victims of their own challenges. Challenges can be internal or external and limit the effectiveness of NGOs in their bid to help target groups in the Global South.

3.2.1 Challenge 1: Shrinking funds

One of the major issues facing NGOs in the Global South is their rapidly depleting financial base. Much of the work that NGOs perform is heavily dependent on donor funding. However, in recent times, funding inflows to NGOs have declined, which presents great financial risks to their operations. The situation has worsened due to global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, and the Russia-Ukraine war, as well as shifts in donor priorities, including diversion of aid from development interventions to meeting growing humanitarian needs or cuts in overall aid contributions. The United Kingdom, for instance, cut its foreign assistance budget by 30% in 2022 (McDade et al., 2023), leading to a dramatic reduction of support to NGOs in the Global South. Only five members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg, Norway, and Sweden) currently meet the expected 0.7% of GNI contribution to international aid (OECD, 2023). The proliferation of NGOs in the Global South and subsequent competition for limited funds has constrained an already tight fiscal space (Poole, 2014). The resultant financial woes experienced by NGOs destabilize their operations and adversely affect their impact on the communities they serve (Parks, 2008).

3.2.2 Challenge 2: Repressive state laws and regulations

Although NGOs are non-state actors, their operations are subject to the laws and regulations of the countries where they operate. These regulations are ideally intended to guide the operations of NGOs and ensure they met the needs and best interests of target groups. However, there are cases where laws or regulations are deployed to intentionally inhibit the effective functioning of NGOs in

the Global South (Chaudhry, 2022). This is particularly the case for NGOs that seek to hold states accountable when they deviate from generally held expectations. Stroup (2019) finds that NGOs that are actively involved in advocacy or activism (e.g., in human rights and climate action) often collide with oppressive governments.

As a result, authoritarian regimes wield laws and regulations as legal weapons to control the work of NGOs that challenge their policies and performance. In some cases, such regimes arrest NGO staff, curtail funding sources, and halt NGO operations. Egypt is notable for introducing laws to block the inflow of international aid to NGOs that protested against political injustices in the country (Weinstein & Christensen, 2013). Chaudhry (2022) found that the Indian Parliament approved policies that authorize the state to determine whether an NGO's license to operate can be renewed or not. The Indian government has used such policies to target and delegitimize the activities of NGOs critical of the government. Similarly, the Pakistani government introduced the 'No Objection Certificate,' a legal document that confirms there are no official concerns about an NGO's operations, as a prerequisite for operation in the country. Reports show the Pakistani state took advantage of this prerequisite to expel human rights-oriented NGOs, such as Plan International and Action Aid, for no apparent reason (Deutsche Welle, 2018). The Pakistani government also forced BRAC to close its expanding education, health, and microfinance programs in the country. In Bangladesh, the founder of Grameen Bank (GB), a specialized bank that manages entities registered as NGOs, has fought adversaries from the Government. GB, however, has managed to ensure its operations are not adversely impacted (Islam, 2023).

3.2.3 Challenge 3: Increasingly complex geopolitical scene

When NGOs first gained prominence, the Global North held the reins of global power. Countries like the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany established themselves as world superpowers exercising influence on global institutions.

Most NGOs were thus based on Western principles of democracy, liberalism, and universalism (Consolo, 2021; Aaronson & Thompson, 2023). However, in recent years, the narrative of the global order has changed as China, Russia, and India have become competitive forces. Their emergence has signaled a tilt in global power distribution and created an avenue for new global actors to assert their power and promote their ideologies, which may contrast with the liberal principles of their Western counterparts.

Divergence in ideological perspectives has adverse implications for NGOs whose Western principles are deemed incompatible with prevailing regional or national values. Famularo (2015) indicates that in China, US-based NGOs like the Ford Foundation have been accused of propagating Western philosophies and causing ideological instability in domestic politics. These accusations have led to the imposition of stringent regulations, leading to the expulsion of such NGOs under the argument of preserving national integrity.

Geopolitical dynamics and the apparent end of Western hegemony mean NGOs must either adapt to norms inconsistent with their values or hold dearly to their Western principles — and thus risk expulsion due to ideological deviation.

3.2.4 Challenge 4: Poor human resource management

A challenge faced by most NGOs in the Global South is poor human resource management. NGOs tend to offer low salaries, unlike the government and the corporate sector. Consequently, they often face the challenge of high staff turnover (Zulu et al., 2017).

Some NGOs lack rigorous human resource planning, leading to staff with very little technical competence required to effectively implement and manage development projects. NGOs often invest very little in staff development, and consequently, their skills remain stagnant and are often insufficient to meet the changing needs of the development environment (Batti, 2013).

3.2.5 Challenge 5: Poor governance and accountability systems

The effective functioning of any organization is partly dependent on good governance. Many NGOs, however, have limited or non-existent good governance, which undermines operational effectiveness and the organization's credibility. Abiddin et al. (2022) find that some NGOs operate without any governing board. Without such key components, NGOs open themselves up to diverse problems, including lack of strategic planning, poor decision-making and risk management, mismanagement of resources, or corruption. Furthermore, the absence of accountable governance, normally provided through governing boards, exacerbates these occurrences and remains a significant weakness for NGOs.

3.2.6 Challenge 6: Limited learning culture

An organization's potential to successfully meet its objectives and grow is sometimes evidenced in its ability to learn (Saadat & Saadat, 2016). Many NGOs either lack or possess only a limited learning culture. The inability to build a sustainable learning culture can be linked to low levels of interaction among NGOs (Abiddin et al., 2022), depriving them of the opportunity to share experiences across the sector and learn from their shortcomings. Consequently, NGOs are caught up in an operational cycle of trial and error, occasionally resulting in failed projects and wasted resources. Competition for limited resources further reduces opportunities for cooperation and peer learning (Herrold & Atia, 2016; Abiddin et al., 2022), as each organization wants to maintain a competitive edge over others by keeping their best practices a secret (Nunnenkamp & Ohler, 2012).

3.2.7 Challenge 7: Succession issues

NGOs often start as the brainchild of a few founders who set the organization's vision and lead its activities. However, natural occurrences such as aging, ill health, or death necessitate leadership change over time.

NGOs often lack strong succession planning. For instance, Comini and Fischer (2009) found that many Brazilian NGOs lack formal succession plans. Without such plans, NGOs grapple with issues such as loss of identity and direction, subpar performance, and loss of respect and legitimacy among stakeholders when their leaders depart or step down (Balser & Carmin, 2009; Maguta, 2016). These challenges make NGOs less functional in the Global South, diminishing their relevance and posing a serious existential threat to their work.

Box 3: Leadership Succession in Bangladeshi NGOs

A reference to the recent succession experiences of some NGOs in Bangladesh may be instructive. Most Bangladeshi NGOs originate from the country's liberation war, which inspired patriotic individuals to become the founders of organizations seeking to transform marginalized groups' lives, including the poor and women. During the past decade, many NGO founders passed away.

Fazle Hasan Abed, BRAC's founder, appointed his daughter and son to key management positions in the organization before his passing in 2019. To ensure accountability and continued growth, he also engaged individuals with global credentials to serve on the boards of its different entities. Before his death, Md Shafiqul Haque Choudhury, the founder of ASA (a large microfinance NGO), appointed one of his sons to a critical position at ASA University. However, within a few days of the founder's passing, the son was relinquished from his new role due to misconduct allegations. Choudhury's other son succeeded him as the President of the NGO ASA (The Business Standard, 2021). In contrast, Zafrullah Chowdhury, the founder of Gonoshasthaya Kendra, passed away recently. Unlike his contemporaries, he did not nominate any successor(s), leading to some 'unwanted and unexpected problems' in governance and management (Newage, 2023).

4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A BETTER FUTURE OF THE NGO PARADIGM IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The issues discussed above mean NGOs in the Global South face existential challenges as they head into the future. If NGOs are not able to adapt to the new realities, their future viability could be greatly at risk. There is a need for a significant paradigm shift in the NGO sector, as echoed by Aaronson & Thompson (2023). This is important if NGOs are to maintain their current role as the third development sector. The following are some of the strategies NGOs could adopt to help them meet the needs of changing times.

4.1 RECOMMENDATION 1: DIVERSIFYING NGO FUNDING MECHANISMS

The decline in aid requires NGOs in the Global South to remodel their funding regimes beyond external financing. Some NGOs have successfully generated funds for their activities without jeopardizing their non-profit identity. BRAC, for instance, has established multiple highly profitable social enterprises separate from its regular NGO social development operations (Davis, 2013). While addressing issues such as unemployment and poverty and supporting supply chain actors, BRAC enterprises provide the NGO with much-needed revenue. BRAC self-funds about 80% of its total budgetary requirement through these enterprises — a stark contrast to its beginnings, when it depended solely on donors for support (Hartnell, 2005; Jonker, 2008; Fateh, 2022). BRAC's financial autonomy and strength account for its continued relevance in Bangladesh and its expanding presence in the Global South. BRAC's counterparts could benefit from adopting similar internal financing mechanisms.

On the side of donor support, there appears to be a glimmer of hope for local NGOs in developing countries. Under the current rules of engagement, major international donors make large grants to Global North NGOs, who, in turn, channel funds to local NGOs in the Global South.

However, Global North organizations are noted to retain most overhead costs even though they may not be directly involved in project implementation. These arrangements constrain local NGOs, which do the bulk of program implementation. As such, donors need to be persuaded to allocate a proportion of overhead budgets to local NGOs directly (Development Initiatives, 2023).

NGOs can also engage new and emerging classes of wealthy individuals or families from the Global South to support philanthropic work. Demonstrating evidence-based impact and convincing dialogue can help attract them to fund NGO-led development activities.

4.2 RECOMMENDATION 2: BUILDING EVIDENCE-BASED LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS

Learning and using evidence is another important way NGOs can remain effective, responsive, and relevant to the populations they serve. BRAC, for instance, has demonstrated a strong relationship between knowledge management and program success. With its independent Research and Evaluation Division (RED), BRAC met its learning needs by undertaking research and impact evaluations to improve its programs and activities (Chowdhury et al., 2014). NGOs can also encourage knowledge acquisition and sharing by establishing peer learning platforms. Such practices would be particularly useful to smaller and newer NGOs, which often need more resources to build learning or evidence-generation infrastructure to gather such information independently. To successfully incorporate a learning culture and use of evidence in NGOs, Britton (2005) and Whatley (2013) emphasize that their leaders must champion the cause from the top of their organizations and persuade their colleagues to adopt new learning approaches.

4.3 RECOMMENDATION 3: CONTEXTUALIZATION OF AID AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

The future relevance of NGOs also relies on their ability to contextualize aid and develop relevant programs for target populations. As INGOs have been criticized as colonialist anachronisms, it is time for them to evolve by loosening Global North control over programs and shifting their focus toward capacity building in the Global South at the national and local levels.

Box 4: BRAC and CRS, Learning to Improve Program Outcomes

Chowdhury (2023) narrates how BRAC, through its Research and Evaluation Division, constantly assessed and modified the Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT) program to help Bangladesh tackle diarrhea among its populace in an effective manner. Similarly, CRS prioritizes learning in its operation to assess and finetune its programs for enhanced outcomes. For the implementation of the crisis impact mitigation initiative — Make Us Knowledgeable and Trained in Emergencies (MUKTE II) — in Monpura Island, CRS, and Caritas Bangladesh, organized an evaluation workshop for the project. The workshop enabled both entities to assess the project’s performance, highlighting efficient and inappropriate project strategies. CRS and Caritas Bangladesh applied their findings as a guiding knowledge framework for the project’s next phase to avert the repetition of ineffective implementation approaches and to amplify successful ones (Catholic Relief Services, 2019).

INGOs need to recognize that their goal is to reduce underserved people’s reliance on them by sharing power and giving autonomy to local communities to lead the design and implementation of future programs. As Walker et al. (2014) emphasize, “operating effectively in the modern development landscape requires an equally modern development approach to promoting local solutions.” Such an approach can foster Global South ownership and sustainability of programs as the active participation of Global South partners and organizations in the problem-solving process equips them with relevant skills to successfully face their challenges beyond INGO presence and intervention timelines.

4.4 RECOMMENDATION 4: INCORPORATING A RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change is the challenge of our generation and the 21st century. It will undermine the livelihoods of millions across the globe and threaten the very survival of the human species. NGOs working with marginal and at-risk populations in poor nations must retool their programming to focus on adaptation and resilience strategies to ensure the well-being of such populations. Many NGOs have begun incorporating suitable staff and planning into their organizations to address the effects of climate change. Donors must also prepare for the development implications and the humanitarian fallout from climate change. NGOs are the on-the-ground shock troops crucial to accelerating the social, economic and political transition required to manage the downside effects of changing temperatures and extreme weather. NGOs are essential in addressing health, food security, shelter, and livelihood impacts. The scale of this challenge demands a collective response. A worldwide collective strategy will require far less competition and greater collaboration and cooperation among civil society actors and NGOs.

4.5 RECOMMENDATION 5: FORGING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS WITH STATES AND BUSINESSES

The problems faced by NGOs in Global South countries and the resources required to overcome them necessitate cooperation with external actors like states and the private sector. Yet, there remains a gigantic challenge, namely the overcoming of tensions between these entities arising from NGO advocacy work. Today, private foreign direct investment in developing nations far exceeds aid financing, which is continuously diminishing. NGOs' challenge is harnessing this market power and aligning business interests with societal needs and interests.

Responding to such a challenge will require NGOs to make a major paradigm shift from seeing the state, markets, and private investment as adversaries to working with them as partners.

Aaronson and Thompson (2023) suggest that NGOs should be tactful and adopt a less confrontational approach to holding governments and businesses accountable. For instance, rather than riding on negative public sentiments and engaging in hostile protests, NGOs might adopt a more diversified portfolio of tactics and diplomatic methods, such as lobbying and negotiation, to push for their desired social change. NGOs might also propose causal explanations to demonstrate how states' or businesses' actions or inactions on one issue could adversely affect other matters of great concern to these actors. Although convincing political and business actors may be time and labor intensive, they are likely to lead to the development of lasting and healthy relationships between NGOs, governments, and businesses, as well as large-scale benefits for the wider population.

NGOs might then leverage these relationships to solicit state support to ensure NGOs can conduct their business with less onerous regulatory oversight. Reduced regulation may lead to greater financial or in-kind support from the private sector for much-needed yet capital-intensive resources such as technology.

5. CONCLUSION

The future of NGOs in the Global South presents many daunting challenges that require a change in approach. As stated by John F. Kennedy, "Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or present will surely miss the future." If NGOs in the Global South rely on current or past practices, they may set in motion dynamics that will lead to their eventual demise. If NGOs recognize and adapt intelligently and with agility to the needs of the future, they will have the potential to create a new paradigm that will support their long-term existence and success.

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