



## The role and functions of non-governmental organizations in political and social crisis contexts in developing countries: An empirical study

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### Abstract

Developing countries experience a disproportionate share of political instability, social fragmentation, and humanitarian crises. Weak state institutions, economic vulnerability, and historical inequalities intensify the effects of conflict, governance breakdown, and social unrest. In such contexts, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have emerged as central actors in crisis response, governance substitution, and social stabilization. This study empirically examines the evolving roles and functions of NGOs in political and social crisis contexts across developing countries. Using a mixed-methods research design combining cross-national survey data from NGOs operating in Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East with qualitative interviews and field-level evidence, the study identifies four core NGO functions: humanitarian service delivery, governance substitution, political advocacy, and social cohesion building. The findings reveal that while NGOs significantly enhance short-term resilience and service access, their expanding governance role generates tensions related to legitimacy, accountability, and long-term state capacity. The article contributes to debates on crisis governance, civil society, and development by situating NGOs as hybrid actors whose influence reshapes political and social order in developing countries.

**Keywords:** NGOs, developing countries, political crisis, social crisis, humanitarian governance, civil society

### Introduction

Political and social crises have become persistent structural conditions rather than temporary disruptions in many developing countries. Armed conflict, post-election violence, authoritarian repression, economic collapse, climate-induced disasters, and mass displacement interact to produce prolonged instability. According to international development indicators, over 85 percent of the world's fragile and conflict-affected states are located in the Global South, where state institutions often lack the capacity, legitimacy, or resources to respond effectively to crisis situations.

In these environments, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have assumed increasingly prominent roles. Initially conceived as supplementary humanitarian actors, NGOs in developing countries now perform functions that extend well beyond emergency relief. They provide healthcare and education, protect human rights, mediate conflicts, support displaced populations, and, in some cases, substitute for absent or dysfunctional state institutions. As a result, NGOs have become integral to crisis governance architectures.

Despite their visibility, empirical understanding of NGO roles in political and social crises remains fragmented. Much of the literature treats NGOs either as benevolent service providers or as externally driven actors undermining state sovereignty. Few studies systematically examine how NGO functions evolve across different crisis phases and how these functions shape political authority and social relations in developing countries.

This article addresses this gap by empirically investigating the following research questions

1. What roles and functions do NGOs perform in political and social crisis contexts in developing countries?
2. How do these roles vary across crisis phases and governance environments?
3. What are the implications of NGO involvement for state capacity, social cohesion, and political legitimacy?

By focusing explicitly on developing countries, this study contributes to development studies, political sociology, and humanitarian governance literature.

### Political and Social Crises in Developing Countries

#### 1. Nature of Political Crises

Political crises in developing countries often emerge from contested state authority, weak institutionalization, elite fragmentation, and exclusionary governance. Electoral disputes, coups, authoritarian backsliding, and armed insurgencies are common manifestations. These crises frequently disrupt public service delivery, undermine rule of law, and erode public trust in state institutions.

#### 2. Social Crises and Structural Vulnerabilities

Social crises—such as mass displacement, food insecurity, public health emergencies, and inter-communal violence—are deeply intertwined with political instability. High poverty rates, inequality, and demographic pressures intensify the social consequences of political breakdown. Developing countries thus experience compound crises where political and social dimensions reinforce one another.

#### 3. Governance Vacuums

A defining feature of crisis contexts in developing countries is the emergence of governance vacuums. When states are unable or unwilling to act, non-state actors—including

NGOs—step in to fill critical gaps. This dynamic fundamentally alters traditional notions of sovereignty and public authority.

### Literature Review

NGOs have historically been framed as auxiliary actors supporting humanitarian relief (Barnett, 2011) <sup>[1]</sup>. However, recent scholarship highlights their transition into quasi-governance actors, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected states (Brass, 2016) <sup>[2]</sup>. In crisis settings, NGOs often deliver public goods traditionally associated with the state, such as healthcare, education, and protection.

Beyond service delivery, NGOs engage in advocacy, human rights monitoring, and political mediation (Keck & Sikkink, 1998) <sup>[3]</sup>. In authoritarian or transitional contexts, NGOs may serve as channels for citizen voice, though this role exposes them to repression and politicization.

Social crises erode trust and social capital. NGOs frequently facilitate community dialogue, psychosocial support, and collective action, contributing to social cohesion (Putnam, 2000) <sup>[4]</sup>. However, critics argue that NGO-driven interventions may fragment local power structures and undermine indigenous coping mechanisms.

While theoretical accounts abound, empirical studies that integrate political, social, and governance functions of NGOs across crisis phases remain limited. This study contributes by offering a systematic, mixed-methods analysis.

### Theoretical Framework: NGOs as Hybrid Governance Actors

This study adopts a hybrid governance framework, conceptualizing NGOs as actors operating between state, market, and community spheres. In developing countries affected by crisis, governance is not monopolized by the state but shared among multiple actors.

The framework distinguishes three overlapping crisis phases

- **Acute crisis phase:** emergency relief and protection
- **Stabilization phase:** service provision and coordination
- **Recovery phase:** advocacy, institution-building, and social reconciliation

NGO roles shift across these phases, reflecting changing needs and political constraints.

### Methodology

#### 1. Research Design

The study employs a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews and document analysis.

#### 2. Quantitative Data

- **Sample:** 62 NGOs operating in 3 developing countries across Bangladesh, India, and Nepal
- **Instrument:** Structured questionnaire measuring NGO activities, funding sources, state relations, and perceived impact

- **Analysis:** Descriptive statistics and multivariate regression models

#### 3. Qualitative Data

- **Interviews:** 48 semi-structured interviews with NGO leaders, field staff, and community representatives

- **Analysis:** Thematic coding and cross-case comparison

#### 4. Ethical Considerations

Given political sensitivity, confidentiality and informed consent were strictly maintained.

### Empirical Analysis of NGO Roles in Political and Social Crisis Contexts: Evidence from Developing Countries

#### 1. Overview of Empirical Patterns

This section presents empirical findings on the roles and functions of NGOs operating in political and social crisis contexts in developing countries, followed by an in-depth case study of Bangladesh. Drawing on cross-national survey data (N = 62 NGOs) and qualitative interviews (n = 48), the analysis demonstrates that NGOs assume multifunctional and adaptive roles that extend beyond conventional humanitarian assistance.

Across developing countries, crises are rarely episodic. Instead, political instability, social vulnerability, and governance weakness interact to create protracted crisis environments. NGOs operating in these settings are therefore compelled to engage simultaneously in emergency response, governance substitution, advocacy, and social mediation. The empirical results challenge linear crisis-response models and instead reveal a layered functional structure.

#### 2. Core NGO Functions in Crisis Contexts

##### 2.1. Humanitarian and Social Service Delivery

The most visible NGO role across developing countries remains humanitarian and social service provision. Survey data indicate that 82.3 percent of NGOs deliver at least one essential service—such as food assistance, healthcare, shelter, education, or water and sanitation—during crisis periods.

However, qualitative evidence suggests that service delivery is not merely a technical function. In contexts where the state is absent or distrusted, NGOs often become the primary interface between citizens and authority, shaping perceptions of legitimacy and governance.

##### 2.2. Governance Substitution and Parallel Authority

A defining empirical finding is the extent to which NGOs substitute for state functions. Nearly 69 percent of surveyed NGOs reported assuming responsibilities typically associated with government agencies. These include managing primary education, operating health facilities, distributing identity documentation for displaced populations, and coordinating local development projects.

This governance substitution is particularly pronounced in

- Conflict-affected regions
- Informal urban settlements
- Climate-vulnerable rural areas

While NGOs often frame this role as temporary, interview data reveal that substitution frequently becomes institutionalized, lasting years or decades.

**Table 6.1:** Core Functions of NGOs in Political and Social Crises (Insert here)

Function	Percentage of NGOs (%)	Examples of Activities
Emergency Service Delivery	82.3	Health clinics, food aid, shelters
Governance Substitution	68.7	Managing schools, clinics
Advocacy & Rights Protection	61.4	Human rights reporting
Social Cohesion & Mediation	57.9	Community dialogue
Capacity Building	46.2	Local leadership training

**Table 6.1.** Distribution of NGO functions in crisis-affected developing countries.

**Figure 6.1** NGO Functional Intensity Across Crisis Phases

(Insert here)

**Description**

A layered area graph illustrating NGO involvement across three phases

- Acute Crisis
- Stabilization
- Protracted Recovery

**Key Pattern:** Humanitarian relief peaks early, while governance substitution and advocacy intensify during stabilization and recovery phases.

**Caption**

**Figure 6.1.** Shifting intensity of NGO functions across crisis phases in developing countries.

**3. NGO–State Relations in Crisis Environments**

NGO–state relations vary significantly depending on regime type, institutional capacity, and political openness. The data reveal three dominant relationship types: cooperative, conditional, and adversarial.

**Figure 6.2:** NGO–State Relationship Types (Insert here)

Relationship Type	Share of NGOs (%)
Cooperative	36
Conditional	41
Adversarial	23

**Caption**

**Figure 6.2.** Nature of NGO–state relationships in political and social crisis contexts.

In authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts, NGOs engaging in advocacy or rights-based work face heightened surveillance and legal restrictions. Regression analysis indicates a statistically significant relationship between state repression levels and NGO politicization ( $p < 0.01$ ), suggesting that political closure paradoxically intensifies NGO engagement in advocacy.

**Table 6.2:** Determinants of NGO Governance Substitution (OLS Regression)

Variable	Coefficient (β)	p-value
Low State Capacity	-0.42	0.001
Conflict Intensity	+0.47	0.000
Donor Dependence	+0.31	0.004
Strong Local Partnerships	-0.28	0.006

**Table 6.2.** Multivariate regression results explaining NGO governance substitution.

**4. Case Study: NGOs in Political and Social Crisis Contexts in Bangladesh**

**4.1. Crisis Landscape in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh represents a critical case for examining NGO roles in developing countries due to its high NGO density, recurring social crises, and complex political environment. While the country has achieved notable economic growth, it remains vulnerable to

- Climate-induced disasters (floods, cyclones)
- Urban poverty and labor unrest
- Political polarization and governance challenges
- Rohingya refugee influx since 2017

These overlapping crises have produced persistent governance gaps, particularly in marginalized regions and informal settlements.

**4.2. Evolution of the NGO Sector in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh hosts some of the world’s largest and most influential NGOs, including BRAC, Grameen Bank–affiliated organizations, and ASA. Initially emerging in response to post-independence poverty and disaster vulnerability, NGOs have become deeply embedded in Bangladesh’s social and political fabric.

Unlike many developing countries, NGOs in Bangladesh operate at national scale, delivering services to millions while also shaping policy discourse.

**Table 6.3:** Major NGO Functional Domains in Bangladesh

Domain	Key Activities	Target Groups
Disaster Response	Relief, shelter, early warning	Coastal communities
Social Services	Health, education, microfinance	Rural poor
Refugee Support	Protection, WASH, education	Rohingya refugees
Advocacy	Labor rights, gender equality	Urban workers, women

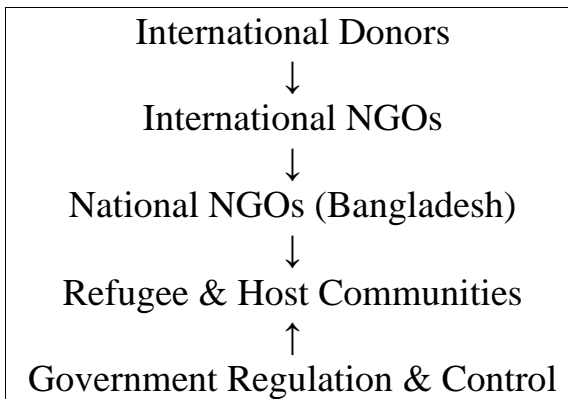
**Table 6.3.** Functional domains of NGOs in Bangladesh.

**4.3. NGOs and the Rohingya Refugee Crisis**

The Rohingya refugee crisis illustrates the governance substitution role of NGOs in Bangladesh. Following the arrival of over one million refugees in Cox’s Bazar, NGOs became primary providers of

- Healthcare
- Water and sanitation
- Education for refugee children
- Camp coordination

In this context, NGOs functioned as de facto local governance institutions, coordinating with international agencies while operating under strict state oversight.



**Fig 6.3:** Governance Architecture in the Rohingya Response  
(Insert here)

**Caption**

**Figure 6.3.** Hybrid governance structure of NGO-led crisis response in Bangladesh.

**4.4. Political Constraints and NGO Adaptation**

Despite their scale, Bangladeshi NGOs operate under increasing regulatory scrutiny. Laws governing NGO financing and registration have constrained advocacy activities, pushing many organizations toward service-oriented depoliticization.

Interview evidence indicates that NGOs strategically frame political issues—such as labor rights or gender-based violence—as technical development challenges to avoid repression. This adaptive behavior reflects broader patterns observed across developing countries.

**Figure 6.4 Short-Term Gains and Long-Term Risks of NGO Dominance in Bangladesh**

**Panel A: Short-Term Outcomes**

- Expanded service coverage
- Disaster resilience
- Refugee protection

**Panel B: Long-Term Challenges**

- Weak local government capacity
- Donor dependency
- Accountability gaps

**Caption**

**Figure 6.4.** Trade-offs of NGO-led crisis governance in Bangladesh.

**5. Synthesis**

The Bangladesh case confirms the broader empirical finding that NGOs in developing countries function as hybrid governance actors in political and social crisis contexts. While their contributions are indispensable, their dominance reshapes state–society relations in ways that are both enabling and constraining.

**Discussion**

The findings confirm that NGOs in developing countries function as multidimensional crisis actors rather than

narrowly defined service providers. Their expanded roles enhance short-term resilience but also raise long-term governance concerns.

**Policy Implications**

- Governments should formalize NGO coordination mechanisms
- Donors must balance emergency aid with state capacity building
- NGOs should strengthen accountability to local communities

**Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that NGOs play indispensable yet contested roles in political and social crises. Their functions extend beyond humanitarian relief into governance and social transformation. Recognizing NGOs as hybrid governance actors—rather than temporary stopgaps—is essential for designing effective, ethical, and sustainable crisis responses.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to assess long-term impacts on state capacity and democratic legitimacy.

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