

The Role of Non-government Organisations in Response to COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Way Forward

Executive Summary

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Background and Rationale

COVID-19, like most countries in the world, put Bangladesh's healthcare system and overall socio-economic situation in an unprecedented crisis. The non-therapeutic preventive measures adopted by the government to control the spread of the virus, such as general holidays and country-wide lockdown led the overall socio-economic situation of the country to be stagnant and challenging. In the first year of the corona pandemic, the population living in Bangladesh below the poverty line increased by 15%, which is about 24.5 million. The pandemic impacted the vulnerable communities, such as people living in extreme poverty, with disabilities, women, people living in urban slums and hard-to-reach areas, and refugee settings much harder.

In past days, non-government organisations (NGOs) played vital roles in the immediate aftermath of disasters by extending assistance. Private sectors are identified as collaborative partners of the government, where integrated initiatives of the government and private sectors are prioritised to manage disaster risk. Nevertheless, at the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, allegations were made against the government for not involving NGOs in the government's policy and strategy to tackle the COVID-19 crisis. On one hand, various initiatives and activities of NGOs were observed at that time; on the other hand, some critics and complaints (inactivity of NGOs, creating pressure to collect microcredit instalments) were also published in various media.

Although some studies on different issues regarding the COVID-19 crisis were conducted in Bangladesh, very few of these studies focused on the contribution and challenges of the NGOs during this crisis. In this context, this research has been conducted to review and analyse the role of NGOs in response to COVID-19, along with their challenges and status of integrity.

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to review the role and challenges of the NGOs in response to COVID-19. The specific objectives of this study are to

1. Review the initiatives and contribution of the NGOs in response to COVID-19;
2. Review the limitations and challenges of NGOs in undertaking and implementing the activities in response to COVID-19;
3. Review the integrity in the activities of the NGOs; and
4. Recommend solutions based on the findings of the study.

Scope of the Study and Timeline

The NGOs registered under the NGO Affairs Bureau, Directorate-General of social welfare, Microcredit Regulatory Authority (MRA), other government agencies that took initiatives in response to COVID-19 are included in this study. Despite taking various important initiatives the private organisations and individuals are not included in this study. This study looks into different types of initiatives taken by the NGOs, challenges in taking and implementing any program, the role of the NGOs as a collaborative partner of government, the experience of the NGO beneficiaries, coordination among the government and non-government organisations, the integrity of the activities taken by NGOs and the role of NGO Affairs Bureau, Directorate-

General of social welfare, Microcredit Regulatory Authority (MRA), and local administration as government supervision agencies.

The data has been analysed based on four integrity indicators (transparency, accountability, participation & coordination, and control of corruption).

The research activities have been done from July 2020 to December 2021. As part of the study, data of beneficiary survey was collected from 1 to 10 December 2020 and data of NGO survey was collected from 25 November to 20 December 2020.

Methodology

A mixed-method was followed to conduct this study, where both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used. Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources.

Table 1: Types of data, Method of data collection, tools and types of respondents

Type of data		Data collection method	Tools	Type of respondents/Source of data
Primary data	Quantitative	Survey	Semi-structured questionnaire	– Chief Executive Officer or other concerned officers of selected NGOs – Beneficiaries
	Qualitative	Key Informant Interview	Checklist	Concerned officials of NGO Affairs Bureau, Directorate-General of social welfare, Local Government, Microcredit Regulatory Authority (MRA), NGO officials
Secondary data		Review	Relevant reports and research articles, information published on the research organisation's website, and media news	

Sampling

Selection of NGOs: Two-stage stratified sampling was applied to select the NGOs. First, 44 districts were chosen out of 64 districts conveniently. International, national and local organisations implementing programmes in those districts were selected randomly at the second phase. The questionnaire was sent to a total of 117 organisations. Among them, a total of 74 organisations (9 international, 23 national, 42 local) sent back their responses. Google form was used to collect this information.

Selection of Beneficiaries: From the national household survey conducted by Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) in 2017, a total of 6281 households who got services from NGOs have been included in this study. A total of 589 individuals from 750 selected households participated in this study.

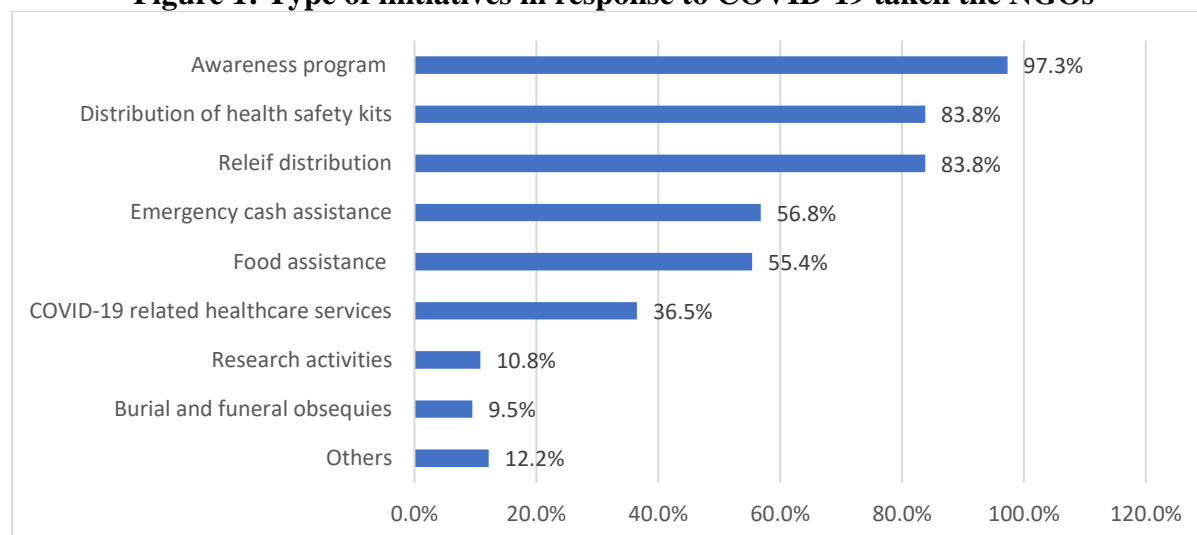
Key Findings

Initiatives and contribution of NGOs in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Time of taking initiatives: About two-thirds of the organisations participating in this study (77.5%) started their activities in response to COVID-19 within the first three months of the corona crisis (March – May 2020). A number of NGOs at the national level undertook preparatory and awareness activities on their own initiative in January 2020 as part of the preparations for tackling the corona crisis.

Activities undertaken by NGOs: Awareness raising, primary health counselling, health care, food aid, distribution of safety supplies, relief assistance, the burial of corona victims, burial, emergency cash assistance, research activities on changing socio-economic situation etc. are notable among the initiatives and activities undertaken by the NGOs in tackling the corona crisis. Almost all the organizations involved in the study have taken some of the above-mentioned activities to address the corona crisis.

Figure 1: Type of initiatives in response to COVID-19 taken the NGOs



Awareness raising: 97.3% of the surveyed organisations took initiatives to raise awareness across the community on wearing masks, maintaining physical distance, handwashing, following the guideline of lockdown, home quarantine and other government regulations to reduce health hazards. These organisations tried to raise awareness by public announcement, distributing leaflets and special guidelines, using posters and banners, arranging training on handwashing and maintaining physical distance etc. 46% of the surveyed beneficiaries received any of the awareness programmes implemented by NGOs. Of them, 72.5% received awareness message through public announcement and 49.1% received through personal communication of NGO staff.

Food assistance and relief: Among the organisations included in this survey, 55.4% distributed food assistance (cooked food, dry food and essential food items) to the poor and needy families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, 83.8% of the organisations provided relief packages where the necessary food items, health safety kits and sometimes cash were included. For example, one national NGO distributed 2,475 metric tons of food among 1,54,670 families, and another volunteer organisation distributed about 10 million boxes of foods – 10,000-150,000 boxes daily in different places of the country.

Healthcare services: Twenty-seven (36.5%) of the surveyed organisations delivered healthcare services. These include establishment of sample collection booths for suspected cases, dedicated telemedicine service, tele-counselling to provide psychological support, providing oxygen cylinder in hospital, emergency ambulance services, establishing Isolation units, COVID-19 dedicated field hospitals and ICU units to manage the healthcare of COVID-19 patients etc.

Providing health safety kits: Sixty-two (83.8%) of the organisations distributed health safety kits. Safety materials included personal protective equipment (PPE), hand sanitiser, disinfection chamber and hand wash points. For example, one international NGO distributed

13 million masks and 3 million other health safety instruments free of cost across Bangladesh. Another national NGO provided 20,543 PPEs for physicians at the price of BDT 2,870,200.

Emergency cash assistance: Forty-two (58.6%) of the surveyed organisations provided cash to the poor and needy people. Cash was provided separately or along with the relief package. Some organisations donated one day's salary of their employees to the relief fund of the Honourable Prime Minister. For example, at the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, one NGO provided cash assistance of around BDT 600 million.

Research and consultancy activities: The NGOs played a notable role in conducting research on health and socio-economic issues in the context of COVID-19 and publishing the results expeditiously. For example, one organisation completed 16 studies on COVID-19, and 32 are currently in progress. Moreover, a part of the salaries and bonus money of their 220 staff was spent on research.

Burial and funeral support: One of the challenges during the corona crisis was to bury the dead from corona and with corona symptoms. Seven (9.5%) organisations played an important role in burying/ cremating the body of the deceased in COVID-19. One NGO buried 4,995 bodies of the deceased in COVID-19 from 28 March 2020 to 8 July 2021.

Programmes/projects for migrants: The pandemic put the migrant workers in different crises such as becoming unemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, being unable to re-join the workplace after leave, being forced to return etc. In this context, some organisations took initiatives to support migrants and their families during the pandemic. The most prominent programmes included providing financial assistance, rehabilitation, legal aid and counselling services to the affected migrants and their families. Additionally, some organisations initiated the consultation/advocacy programmes for the payment of arrear/due payment to returnees and supported the government by providing accommodation for quarantine.

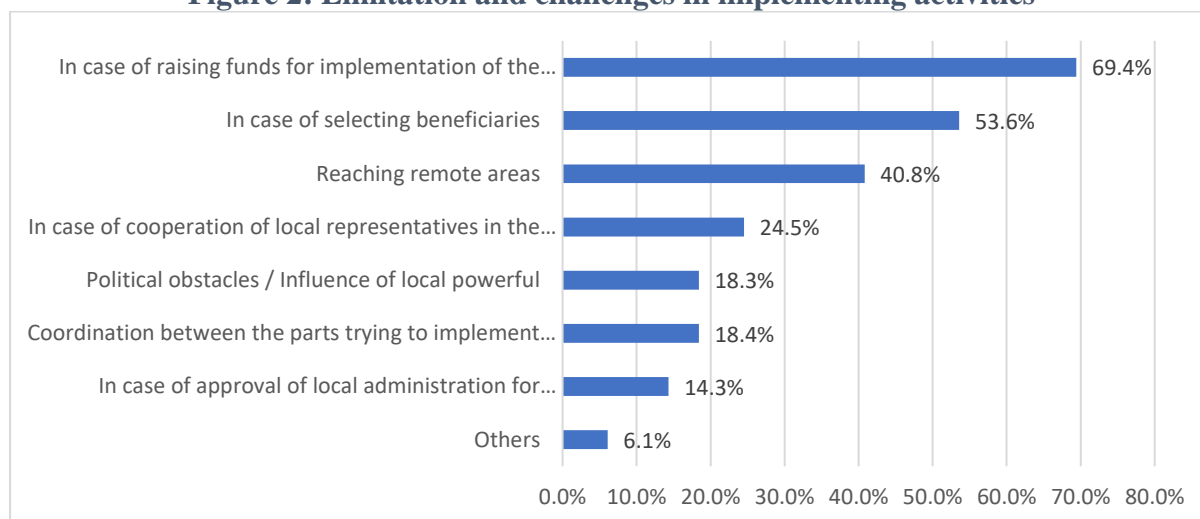
Disbursing loans from Incentive Package: According to Bangladesh Bank, microfinance institutions disbursed loans under incentive packages to the marginalised and low-income groups more efficiently than other authorities. From the discerned amount of BDT 30 billion, around BDT 27,738.4 million were approved for distributing through microcredit organisations and another BDT 21,378.1 million distributed by 184 institutions till June 2021. On average BDT 42,925 was received through these institutions by 3,60,636 marginalised and low-income people. Among them, 3,24,560 were women.

Contribution as a partner in the implementation of government programmes: Around 68% of participating institutions have contributed to implementing different activities of the government during COVID-19 pandemic. Among them 92% was involved with the government's COVID-19 related awareness programme. Furthermore, 64% of the NGOs was engaged in the relief distribution while 44% participated in providing financial aid programmes. About 30% of institutions contributed to delivering COVID-19 related healthcare services, and 4% in collaboration with the government performed the burial of dead bodies or funeral of COVID-19 affected people.

Limitations and Challenges in undertaking and implementing programmes

About 66.2% of organisations that participated in the study faced obstacles or challenges at the field level in undertaking and implementing the programmes.

Figure 2: Limitation and challenges in implementing activities



Fund crisis: According to a research, 46% of NGOs do not have any regular source of funds. For more than two-thirds of the surveyed organisations the primary funding source to implement their programme is general funds and ongoing projects fund. Moreover, 36.5% of the institutions are working on new funds related to the COVID-19 programme. At the time of the survey, about 83.7% (62) of the organisations had at least one ongoing project funded by development partners. Of these, for 35% of organisations, the donor agencies had reduced the allocated fund for ongoing projects. As a result, most organisations (87%) had to cut the project expenses. As a result, organisations had to reduce the salary allowance/benefits of the staff, and postpone the ongoing project to adapt with consolidated funds. During COVID-19, microcredit organisations faced relatively more financial constraints due to the shrinking microcredit activities. Compared to the normal situation, around BDT 450 billion was less distributed during March 2020 – June 2021, and their income was reduced by 30%. According to the information of MRA, nearly BDT 5 billion worth of social safety net programme was on halt due to the shortage of funds. Among the surveyed institutions of this study 54% are involved in microcredit activities, and all the organisations were at risk during COVID-19.

Challenges in compiling the list of beneficiaries for relief: More than half (53.6%) of the surveyed organisations faced various challenges in preparing the list of beneficiaries for the relief programmes. These organisations were forced to include the beneficiaries who are not eligible for relief due to the influence of local people's representatives and powerful politicians. In addition, 18.3% of organizations were affected by political impediments and the influence of local authorities in implementing their activities. An allegation was made against a Dalit community leader for influencing the list by enlisting acquaintances in preparing the list for the Dalit community. They also faced problems preparing a priority-based list due to the high rate/number of relief seekers.

Other challenges: 41% of organisations faced difficulties with delivering relief to the hard-to-reach area, and 25% got non-cooperation from the local people's representatives in implementing activities.

Integrity in collecting funds, expenditure and implementing COVID-19 related programme

According to key informants of supervisory bodies, there were no allegations of irregularities and corruption against NGOs regarding the collection and expense of funds. However, serious allegations were raised against one NGO for embezzlement of funds, particularly for honorarium and training allowances by applying the means of signature forgery of local elected

representatives, government officials and health workers who did to show up in meetings, seminars and training of the project, and misappropriating major part of the fund through fake bills and vouchers.

Eighty-one persons (14%) among the beneficiaries surveyed in this study were enlisted by NGOs for relief during the COVID-19 crisis. However, 32.2% of enlisted participants mentioned irregularities and corruption in the process of preparing the list. To be included in the list, 20% of the enlisted people had to lobby with influential people, while some stated nepotism and not getting relief despite being enlisted. However, none reported of paying any bribe. Nine out of 26 beneficiaries mentioned registering complaint to the relevant/ respective organisations. Though all the complaints were registered but no action was taken. On the other hand, beneficiaries of different programmes registered complaints to four (5.4%) of the surveyed organisations. Most of them complained against the irregularities in selecting beneficiaries.

Unwilling to voluntarily disclose information: With a few exceptions, most of the organisations did not reveal the information on the nature, scope, expenditure and beneficiary of the programmes undertaken during the period of COVID-19 on their websites. Although some organisations published the nature and scope of the activities/programmes on their websites, the scope and expenditure were not given.

Irregularities in microcredit activities: A section of microcredit institutions were accused of collecting the instalments of microcredit loans during the COVID-19 period despite having the instructions not to collect the instalments of microcredit loans and collect the instalments at convenient times. About 71% (418 people) of beneficiaries that participated in the survey are regular beneficiaries of the microcredit programmes of different NGOs. Among them, about 26% faced challenges to repay the loan or instalments. About 6.2% of the beneficiaries were mistreated by the employees of the concerned organisation for collecting the instalments, 2.1% also got threats in this regard. Some other serious allegations such as raising the interest rate, imposing a penalty for being unable to pay instalments etc., were reported against some microcredit organisations.

Coordination among Government and NGOs in tackling Corona

Lack of coordination in designing and implementing the programme at the local level in the early stage of the COVID-19 crisis was observed. The reasons for such lack of coordination include the local authorities not being informed about some programmes, the local authorities not given time with other activities in some cases, irregularities of the coordination meeting of NGOs at the Upazila level, lack of integrated database or map containing details of the activities taken by the government and non-government organisations. Later on, noticeable coordination between the government and NGOs developed in various programmes to deliver COVID-19 related health care services, relief and cash distribution, and the burial of the deceased. One international organisation prepared an urban road map to have better coordination to distribute the relief. It is already mentioned that around 68% of participating institutions contributed in implementing different government activities during COVID-19.

The role of oversight bodies and development partners

The role of the NGO Affairs Bureau: During the corona crisis, an online approval process was launched for new and ongoing projects. As a result, the project and budget approval activities could be carried out properly, even though it was temporarily halted at first. As of June 2021, a total of BDT 4,260 million sanctioned by the donor agencies against the total of 228 projects (FD-6) of 178 NGOs was approved and disbursed by the NGO Affairs Bureau. Twenty-seven (37%) of the surveyed organisations worked on COVID-19 related new funds;

of these, 23 organisations did not face any difficulty in getting approval of projects from the NGO Affairs Bureau.

The role of other oversight bodies: The Microcredit Regulatory Authority (MRA) provided some instructions to the microfinance institutions such as keeping the office germ-free, not insisting on payment of instalment for a specific period during corona crisis, not dismissing staff involved in microfinance activities, holding off group meetings or court-yard meetings, and increasing digital transactions, etc. Although the MRA created a monitoring cell consisting of one Director and eight Deputy Directors to receive and resolve grievances, no record was kept of grievance redressed. A letter from the Director-General of Social Welfare Directorate was issued urging 56,000 organisations registered under the department to deliver the necessary materials to at least two families every day.

The role of donor agencies: Till June 2021, the NGO Affairs Bureau approved a total of BDT 4,260 million against 228 projects (FD-7), which was sanctioned by the donor agencies. The United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) donated about BDT 260 million to three national and two international organisations that responded to overcome the COVID-19 crisis in Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh signed three agreements with the World Bank for US\$ 1.04 billion to overcome the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This agreement is aimed to help Bangladesh accelerate economic recovery and the expansion of the COVID-19 vaccination programme. It will also strengthen the country's health system in the field of detection, prevention, and treatment of COVID-19.

Conclusion

The NGOs played a remarkable role as a partner of the Government through implementing various activities in response to COVID-19. In addition to the fund allocated for COVID-19 related programmes and ongoing project funds, a significant number of organisations took different initiatives such as relief and food assistance, cash disbursements, awareness programmes, healthcare and protection supplies, burial and funeral obsequies by using their own funds. From the incentive package announced by the government, the microfinance organisations were more effective in disbursing loans to the marginalised and low-income groups.

Fund crisis due to lack of a regular source of income, curbing fund by donor agencies, disruption of microfinance activities, etc. were the main challenges for the NGOs in implementing programmes to address the corona crisis. The local leaders/authorities put influence in preparing the list of possible beneficiaries even in times of this type of crisis. With few exceptions, most NGOs did not voluntarily disclose information on their activities in response to COVID, although no mentionable irregularity was identified in the collection and expenditure of corona programmes. Allegations are there against some microcredit organisations for pressurising to collect instalments despite having an embargo on doing so. Although there was a lack of coordination between government and NGOs in the early days of the pandemic, there has been a development of coordination later on in various activities, including healthcare and relief distribution. However, deficiencies were found in the grievance redress system of NGOs and supervisory bodies.

Recommendations

1. Various activities of NGOs (raising awareness, food aid, healthcare, cash assistance and relief activities) must be maintained and continued at the grassroots in response to the COVID crisis.

2. The type, scope, expenditure, beneficiary information, etc. of the programmes undertaken by the NGOs during the COVID-19 should be fully published and regularly updated on the website of the respective organisations.
3. Effective measures should be taken in resolving grievances with regard to activities conducted by NGOs at the field level during the corona pandemic, especially for the relief of the beneficiaries. In this case, the monitoring system should be strengthened by the monitoring agency.
4. The supervisory body should create an integrated database and digital map containing the beneficiaries' information to eliminate the inconsistency in implementing the activities.
5. To successfully deal with any disaster situation, the government needs to adopt a joint integrated action plan with all NGO networks from the outset at the central and local levels.
6. The involvement of local level NGOs has to be enhanced in the action plans of the government and donor agencies through adopting long-term projects to address the corona crisis, and the programme should increase the coverage of the livelihood and social security sectors for the ultra poor.
7. Two separate funds need to be set up by the government and the donor agency to run the response activities of the NGOs during different disasters.
8. Considering the capabilities of NGOs, they may be involved in the vaccination registration program, where applicable.
9. The government and donor agencies must provide policy support and financial incentives to make the financially vulnerable organisations survive.
10. It is to ensure that microfinance institutions may obtain loans on easy terms, in a short period, at low-interest rates, and to facilitate the marketing of the products produced by the beneficiaries at a fair price.

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