NGOs helped change Bangladesh. Can they keep pace with its changing needs?



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Bangladesh would not be the country it is today without its NGOs. From the difficult years following independence, non-governmental organisations became an important part of our development story. They reached villages where public services were weak, experimented with new ways of tackling poverty, brought women into development programmes, expanded primary education, promoted family planning and immunisation, popularised oral rehydration therapy, extended microfinance, and responded to floods and cyclones.

Some of these initiatives eventually reached millions. Others demonstrated approaches that government subsequently adopted, expanded or incorporated into national programmes. Brac's early community-based tuberculosis (TB) programme, for example, helped demonstrate an approach that later became part of the country's nationwide government-NGO partnership for TB control.

But that era is changing rapidly. The question is no longer whether NGOs contributed to Bangladesh. They unquestionably did. The question is whether the NGO model that served us so well over the past five decades can still work in the future.

Two years ago, with my colleagues Ray Offenheiser and Emmanuel Gyasi, I examined this question in a study on the future of NGOs in the Global South. We concluded that Southern NGOs were approaching a crossroads. The traditional model of foreign donors raising money in wealthy countries and financing NGOs to implement projects in poorer ones was becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. But this is not simply a funding crisis. Something more fundamental is happening.

Bangladesh itself has changed. The country in which NGOs emerged in the 1970s was desperately poor, overwhelmingly rural, and institutionally fragile. Government services had limited reach and markets were underdeveloped. NGOs frequently filled gaps because few others could. Today's Bangladesh is different. Government's capacity to reach rural population has increased, the private sector is vastly larger, digital technology has transformed communications, and a more educated population has different expectations. If NGOs respond merely by searching harder for the next donor-funded project, they may survive for a while, but not necessarily remain relevant.

Perhaps the old NGO business model is dying. That does not mean NGOs themselves should disappear. It means they must reinvent themselves. First, NGOs need to rediscover their role as innovators. Many important contributions of Bangladeshi NGOs began as experiments. Their strength was that they could try what the government could not easily try, learn from failure, and demonstrate what worked. Once the government or private sector can effectively deliver a service, an NGO does not necessarily need to continue providing it. It should move on to the next unsolved problem.

Second, NGOs should increasingly become bridges between citizens and the state, rather than substitutes for the state. They can organise communities, amplify otherwise unheard voices, and help make public institutions more responsive. But ultimate responsibility for essential public services must remain with government. Third, NGOs must rediscover their wider civil-society and watchdog role. One important future function may be independently monitoring how government and other development actors are performing. Bangladesh already has useful examples. Education Watch has periodically examined the state of education from outside government. At the same time, Bangladesh Health Watch has brought independent evidence and public scrutiny to health equity, the health workforce, and universal health coverage. Such initiatives help society ask whether programmes are working, who is being left behind, and what needs to change. NGOs may sometimes contribute more by generating evidence and holding institutions accountable than by delivering yet another service themselves.



VISUAL: **ALIZA RAHMAN**

Then comes perhaps the most immediate challenge: how will NGOs pay for all this? Foreign grants cannot remain the only answer. One route is generating their own resources. Brac experimented with this early. Aarong created markets for rural artisans; other enterprises grew around agriculture and livelihoods; microfinance generated income as well as services; and institutions such as Brac Bank demonstrated that commercial ventures could coexist with a wider social purpose.

But this model has limits. Most NGOs do not have the capital, scale or managerial capacity to create successful businesses. More importantly, commercial success can pull an organisation away from its social mission. An NGO should not become a business with a development programme attached. The lesson, therefore, is not that every NGO should establish a bank or an Aarong. It is that financial independence matters. Future NGOs will need a diversified mix of international grants, domestic philanthropy, responsible social enterprise, individual giving, corporate contributions and, where appropriate, government contracts.

There is another, less discussed problem with donor dependence. Increasingly, funding from the Global North is awarded through competitive bids around priorities defined by donors themselves. So, NGOs from the Global South compete to implement programmes conceived elsewhere. This may produce well-managed projects, but it can also turn NGOs into contractors rather than independent development institutions. An organisation rooted in a community should have the freedom to identify what it considers the most pressing problems and experiment with solutions, rather than simply following the priorities set by donors in their latest funding proposals.

This is why the international discussion about "localisation" matters. Localisation cannot mean transferring implementation responsibility while retaining the power to set priorities in Washington, London, Geneva, or New York. Southern organisations need not only a larger share of the money but also greater freedom to decide how to use it. Diversifying their income, including generating some resources themselves, can therefore provide something even more valuable than financial sustainability: intellectual and programmatic independence.

But greater autonomy brings greater responsibility. NGOs must also look inwards. Some have become bureaucratic. Leadership succession remains difficult and often controversial. Accountability sometimes flows upwards to donors rather than downwards to communities. Local legitimacy must be earned through transparency, good governance, evidence, and ethical leadership.

So, do NGOs have a future? Some probably do not. Organisations that exist primarily because donor projects exist will struggle when those projects disappear. Institutional survival cannot itself be the objective. But the need for independent, innovative, and socially rooted institutions has hardly disappeared. Climate change, rapid urbanisation, inequality, unemployment, pandemics, ageing, and the continuing exclusion of marginalised populations are creating new challenges. Government cannot solve all of them alone, nor can markets. The NGOs that flourish may therefore look quite different. They may receive less foreign aid, implement fewer programmes themselves and spend more time innovating, convening, generating evidence, strengthening citizen voice, and holding institutions accountable.

Fifty years ago, Bangladesh's NGOs succeeded because they were willing to challenge conventional wisdom, experiment, make mistakes, and remain close to ordinary people. That spirit, not any particular organisational model, is their most valuable inheritance. Perhaps, then, we are asking the wrong question. Bangladesh should not ask whether NGOs still have a future. We should ask what kind of NGOs Bangladesh will need for its future. Those that rediscover their roots in communities, innovation, independence, accountability, and social justice may be more necessary than ever.

Why labour unions are rising against the IMF and WB

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When demonstrators filled the streets of Bangkok on October 16, media coverage focused on clashes with police barricades or echoed official narratives from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) meetings, which offered no real solutions to rising debt, geopolitical conflict, or the macroeconomic risks of AI, prescribing instead more spending cuts and deregulation. The narrative overlooked a vital pillar of the protests: organised labour. Over a thousand members of the Thai Labour Solidarity Confederation (TLSC), State Enterprises Workers' Relations Confederation (SERC), and their global allies marched in Bangkok as part of rallies in over 150 cities across 38 countries, marking Global Day of Action vs the IMF and WB.

Multilateral lending frameworks and policy prescriptions strike at the very heart of workers' economic survival. To understand this, one must examine the global debt architecture choking public budgets across the Global South. Developing nations now spend a median of 9.5 percent of their government revenue strictly on sovereign debt interest payments—a 25-year-high that represents more than triple the burden borne by high-income economies. According to the UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD), a record 61 developing countries are forced to allocate at least 10 percent of their revenues to interest alone, severely constraining budgets.

In 2024 alone, developing nations paid $384 billion in external debt interest. This is part of the total net interest developing nations paid across all public debt (domestic and external combined) that reached $921 billion, marking a 10 percent increase from the prior year. Consequently, roughly 32 low-income countries are currently in debt distress or at high risk of it, trapping between 340 and 370 crore people in nations that spend far more on foreign interest payouts than on essential public services like healthcare and education.

When governments are forced to prioritise interest payouts to foreign creditors over social spending, domestic fiscal space collapses. To avoid default or secure emergency assistance, governments adopt strict fiscal discipline dictated by loan conditionalities—passing the financial burden directly onto working families through reduced public spending, regressive taxation, and structural austerity.

The severe consequences for public sector workers and essential services are well documented, with IMF-imposed restrictions on public sector wage bills systematically undermining national workforces. By capping government wage bills, these conditionalities force hiring freezes and real-wage cuts. In practice, this starves schools, clinics, and social programmes of staff, shifting the unpaid care work onto women and driving essential workers into poverty. When public services are gutted to satisfy foreign interest payments, workers pay twice: first through lower pay and lost jobs, and second through diminished access to the services they rely on to survive.

Both the IMF and WB have historically seen labour unions as obstacles to their structural reforms. The World Bank was forced to abandon its annual "Doing Business" report in 2021 following widespread criticism, including for encouraging labour market deregulation and lower labour standards. Yet its replacement, the "B Ready" report, continues to promote a race to the bottom in labour standards, rewarding countries that cut workers' entitlements, pay a minimum wage that is not "burdensome" (read: unlivable) and relieve corporations of obligations to contribute to social protection.

Nowhere are these impacts clearer than in the push for privatisation. Both institutions continue to promote privatisation of public services as a way to escape debt. Yet privatisation actively deepens financial crises. Governments sell off public assets for discounted prices and lock in guaranteed payments to the private sector for the delivery of those services, creating "off-book", long-term debts in US dollars.

Energy unions from Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Thailand joined protests specifically to expose these risks. In Pakistan, where the IMF demands the total sell-off of remaining public energy systems, privatisation has been an unmitigated disaster. Over the past two years, "capacity payments"—fees paid to private companies for unused power generation—accounted for over 60 percent of payments to energy suppliers. Today, more than half of consumer tariffs are swallowed up paying companies for electricity they never produced. To enforce these IMF directives and make further sales attractive, the Pakistani government has repeatedly cracked down on energy unions, attempting to ban trade union activities, which are protected by the constitution and international law.

In Bangladesh, between 2020-21 and 2024-25, electricity delivered to the grid increased by just 1 percent, while payments to independent power producers surged by 134 percent. Driven by currency devaluation and rigid dollar-denominated contracts, capacity payments nearly tripled to $2.9 billion, accounting for nearly half of all independent power producers (IPP) payments. To satisfy IMF conditions requiring the slashing of energy subsidies, the government has repeatedly hiked consumer tariffs, transferring the cost of corporate guarantees directly onto working households while pushing ahead with distribution privatisation.

Thai unions marched against this same long shadow of IMF-World Bank policy influence. In the wake of the IMF-fuelled 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, the government targeted major public sectors, including petroleum, postal services, airports, and telecommunications, for structural reform. Energy unions successfully halted the complete privatisation of the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT). Yet, decades later, Thai workers still bear the burden of higher Value Added Tax (VAT) rates imposed under those historical loan agreements. Entities like Airports of Thailand and state telecoms were partially privatised. Thai labour unions continue to struggle against ongoing corporatisation.

Today, workers recognise that these institutions remain unyielding advocates for big business —a bias expected to continue as International Financial Institutions (IFIs) navigate AI and privilege corporate tech monopolies over workforce displacement. Rather than enforcing austerity, IFIs should be pushed to answer fundamental questions: why not address inflation by reining in corporate profit margins, or champion global wealth taxes to stop resource hoarding by billionaires? The strong union turnout on October 16 showed the workers' stance on austerity as an immediate threat to labour rights and collective survival. Until international lenders eliminate predatory debt structures and abandon destructive conditionalities, the voices of organised labour on the streets will only grow louder.

একই আদেশ ও তারিখে স্থলাভিষিক্ত



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সর্বসাধারণের অবগতির জন্য জানানো যাচ্ছে যে, বিভিন্ন ব্যক্তি ও প্রতিষ্ঠান কর্তৃক বাস্তবায়িত বৃক্ষরোপণ কর্মকান্ডকে নিম্নে বর্ণিত ০৭(সাত) টি শ্রেণীভূক্ত করে প্রত্যেক শ্রেণীতে ৩(তিন)টি করে পুরস্কার প্রদানের জন্য সরকার সিদ্ধান্ত গ্রহণ করেছেন।

(ক) প্রাথমিক বিদ্যালয়/ উচচ বিদ্যালয়/এবতেদায়ী মাদ্রাসা/ সিনিয়র মাদ্রাসা /কলেজ/বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়
(খ) ইউনিয়ন পরিষদ/উপজেলা পরিষদ/জেলা পরিষদ/পৌরসভা/সিটি কর্পোরেশন/ অধিদপ্তর/পরিদপ্তর/সেক্টর/কর্পোরেশন/প্রতিষ্ঠান / এন জি ও/ক্লাব/স্বেচছাসেবী সংস্থা
(গ) ব্যক্তিগত পর্যায়ে বৃক্ষরোপণ
(ঘ) ব্যক্তি মালিকানাধীন নার্সারী
(ঙ) ব্যক্তিগত/প্রাতিষ্ঠানিক পর্যায়ে সৃজিত ছাদ বাগান
(চ বন বিভাগ কর্তৃক সৃজিত বাগান
(ছ) বৃক্ষ সম্পর্কিত গবেষণা/সংরক্ষণ/উদ্ভাবন

আবেদনপত্রের ফরম প্রাপ্তি ও দাখিলের স্থান

(১) বিভাগীয় বন কর্মকর্তা, চট্টগ্রাম উত্তর বন বিভাগ, চট্টগ্রাম এর কার্যালয়, বন পাহাড়, নন্দনকানন, চট্টগ্রাম।
(২) উপজেলা নির্বাহী কর্মকর্তার কার্যালয় (সকল), চট্টগ্রাম জেলা।
(৩) রেঞ্জ কর্মকর্তার কার্যালয়- মীরসরাই রেঞ্জ, মীরসরাই উপজেলা/ বাঁরৈয়াঢালা রেঞ্জ,সীতাকুন্ড উপজেলা/ নারায়নহাট রেঞ্জ,ফটিকছড়ি উপজেলা/ হাটহাজারী রেঞ্জ, হাটহাজারী উপজেলা/ ইছামতি রেঞ্জ, রাউজান উপজেলা/ রাংগুনিয়া রেঞ্জ, রাংগুনিয়া উপজেলা/ পটিয়া রেঞ্জ, পটিয়া ও বোয়ালখালী উপজেলা/ পটিয়া এস.এফ.এন.টি.সি, কর্ণফুলী ও আনোয়ারা উপজেলা/ দোহাজারী রেঞ্জ,চন্দনাইশ উপজেলা / পদুয়া রেঞ্জ, লোহাগাড়া উপজেলা/ কালীপুর রেঞ্জ, বাঁশখালী উপজেলা/ মাদার্সা রেঞ্জ, সাতকানিয়া উপজেলা/ সন্দ্বীপ রেঞ্জ, সন্দ্বীপ উপজেলা/ শহর রেঞ্জ, মহানগর এলাকা, চট্টগ্রাম জেলা।

এতদসংক্রান্ত অন্যান্য জ্ঞাতব্য বিষয় (প্রয়োজন হলে) বর্ণিত কার্যালয় হতে অফিস চলাকালীন সময়ে জানা যাবে।

আবেদনপত্র দাখিলের শেষ সময় ঃ ২৫/১১/২০২৬ খ্রিঃ পর্যন্ত।

(ড. আবু নাসের মোহসিন হোসেন)
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