

The NGOs sector in Bangladesh: emergence, contribution and current debate

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Abstract: This paper briefly discusses the growth, types and activities and both positive and negative impacts of NGOs in Bangladesh. The result showed the NGOs have started their work in Bangladesh as a relief and rehabilitation activities but they are now becoming a large partner of the government for socio-economic development. After that, this paper also showed the implementer, catalyst, and partner role of the NGOs in Bangladesh. Although NGOs have the largely positive impact in our socioeconomic development especially in the grassroots level, they have also negative impact in our society. Some NGOs in Bangladesh is working like as a quasi commercial activities and corporate bodies where their main intention is to making profit. Some microcredit provider in Bangladesh working like as the traditional banking system and they make the trap for the poor where they have to repay the loan with high interest rate. Finally, this paper makes a clear view that NGOs' activity in Bangladesh is positive and good.

Keywords: Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), History, Development, Bangladesh.

1. Introduction:

Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), as a basic service provider to the vulnerable people of society have been rapidly increasing especially from the last two decades in the local, national and international developmental arena. In terms of ensuring social progress, policy advocacy and public campaigns are major functions of such organizations. NGOs are working through covering broaden arena including emergency response, democracy building, conflict resolution, human rights work, cultural protection, environmental activism, policy suggestion, research, information sharing (Lewis, 2010; Lewis & Kanji, 2009). In order to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) alongside with the Perspective Plan 2010-2021 based on the Vision 2021, NGOs with its staffs have been working selflessly, by their activities in health, education, and gender equity sectors significantly. Thus way such organizations along with governmental organizations are playing core role in eradicating extreme poverty and hunger in least developed and developing countries, achieving universal primary education for all, promoting gender equality and reduce gender based violence, reducing child and infant mortality, improving maternal health, fighting diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria, ensuring environmental sustainability, and developing global partnerships for action (Lewis & Kanji, 2009).

In terms of overcoming the vulnerable situation just after the independence war 1971, few Bangladeshi individuals attempted to do some for the country. At this time some NGOs were born and started their activity as a relief and rehabilitation with their lower capacity and capability. After that, this sector has been rapidly

increased in terms of size, scope membership, and finances pressure within the international development area. This sector is now considered as one of the most sophisticated development networks in whole world. One example is that BRAC has been enhanced its activity not only in Bangladesh but also other eight countries including Afghanistan. Most importantly, it has the largest employer which is a little behind then the Bangladesh Government (Fowler, 2010). Nowadays, NGOs are the main channel for catching the attention of the both national and international donor agencies for Bangladesh. For example, NGOs earned USD 5,429,242.13 and USD 719,012,183.05 in 1990-91 and 2013-14 respectively from different international donors (Bureau, 2003). NGOs are also increasing its working arena: in 1990 -1991 it approved 464 projects, whereas in 2013-2014 the numbers of approved projects were 1116. Additionally, International donors and agency have been recognized NGOs as a fertile place for their development program. Till 31 December 2014, the numbers of working NGOs in Bangladesh were 2356.

2. Definition of NGOs

The NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) simply refers to the voluntary organizations, private voluntary non-profit organizations or not-for-profit organizations. It is very difficult to define the NGOs because many scholars, disciplines define it in various patterns. Moreover, this term does not refer to descriptive or analytical rigor but it is rooted with cultural or historical thoughts about NGO where it was emerged (Lewis, 2010), (2010). For instance, the nonprofit organization is widely used in the USA, where the citizen' organizations are rewarded with the financial benefits if they are not working for profit gain or commercial activities rather for

public welfare (Lewis, 2010). On the other hand, “voluntary organization” or “charity” is frequently used in the United Kingdom, where voluntary work is related with both Christian values and the development of charity law. For example, Oxfam is more likely to register as a charity organization. The NGO acronym was first used in 1945 by the United Nations to specify their development activities for those were not of national governments. But many NGOs established in late 19th and early 20th century, like as the British Anti-Slavery Society (1838), International Committee of the Red Cross (1864), Sierra Club (1892), Save the Children Fund (1919) (Kim, 2014). The history of such activities is too long and could not be recognized as nongovernmental.

There are various formations of NGOs, ranging from small informal groups to large formal agencies (Lewis, 2010). In addition, NGOs are implementing various types of activities in different societies, with its' different shapes. (Lewis, 2010). These activities also differ from country to country. For examples, NGOs are considering a dense network of voluntary associations in Lebanon, Rwanda, and the Weimar Republic, but they are not successful to build democratic norms and peaceful coexistence in those countries (Edwards, 2007). In contrast, NGOs have a good results in terms of democratic participation in India but tiny success in poverty reduction (Edwards, 2007). On the other hand, NGOs of Spain, Botswana, and Hungary have good impacts on economic and social development with a lower density of number. But in China and the East Asian tigers, NGOs have been increasing number and size, achieving good economic result but they are controlled by their own government.

The shape of NGOs also differs in their structure for example, some NGOs are either small or large; some NGOs are formal or informal; as well as some are bureaucratic or some are flexible (Lewis, 2010). In relation to funding, some NGOs depend on the external fund and some NGOs depend on only locally mobilized resources (Lewis, 2010). There are different form of NGOs, such as community-based organizations (work only within a specific community) or people's organizations and intermediary forms of NGOs (works outside of the community and grassroots support organizations (GSOs) (Lewis, 2010). There are some bogus NGOs established by the government, like as (GONGOs – government-organized NGOs). There are also briefcase NGOs established by individuals for personal profit gain. Some NGOs are well-resourced and wealthy while some NGOs are very poor and breakable, struggling for surviving and existence. Some NGOs have highly professionals and expert staff while other has only volunteers and supporters (Lewis, 2010). NGOs are generally worked as nongovernment organizations but they can receive fund from the government. They are the nonprofit organizations, but some are only shaped for earning profit (Lewis, 2010). For this reason, the boundary of NGO is unclear. But in normal sense, NGO refers to the voluntary and nonprofit organization, worked for socio-economic development. It is an association that organized for the voluntary basis where

one or more persons dedicated to implement the projects as the grass root level (Rahman, 1993).

Although NGOs are not part of the government structure or they works outside the government structure they are being worked within the legal framework the country where they worked According to this view “associations voluntarily formed by individuals for the purpose of rendering welfare and development services outside government structures; drawing funds formational or international sources, and functioning within the legal frame work of the country” (Halim, 1993). NGOs are not the part of the government or not part of a public sectors bureaucracy. However, NGOs receive support from the government. Ashan define the NGO in the Bangladesh context as “organizations engaged in activities that are private in origin, voluntary by design but selling services, nonprofit distributing by claims but make profit out of the provided services cross-subsidizing” (Ahsan, 2005).

NGOs are generally considered as a third sector organization, which is neither government sector or nor business sector, are primarily worked in development or humanitarian action at local, national, and international levels (Lewis, 2010). This may worked whether market or state failed. So, NGO is defined “as a response to demand for public or quasi-public goods and services supplied by neither the market nor the state” (Weisbrod, 2000). “NGOs are self-governing, private, not-for-profit organizations that are geared to improve the quality of life for disadvantaged people.” (Lewis, 2010). Various types of groups are included in this third sector as trade unions, professional associations, organizations concerned with arts or sport, and media (Lewis, 2010).

3. Reasons for rapid growth of NGO in Bangladesh

Despite lack of resources and expertise, Bangladesh government is spontaneously providing goods and services from public sectors to his population. But due to corruption, political patronage, and weak management system, the services did not achieve success. Besides this, due to the rapid growth of its population, the Bangladesh Government has remained unsuccessful in terms of providing sufficient services. Furthermore, the government give more emphasize to develop the macro level infrastructure like, as roads, hospitals, school, bridge etc. As a result, it is very hard for the government to give social services at the grassroots level. On the contrary, NGOs can easily reach the grassroots people for providing services (Bagci, 2003). So, international donor agency prefers NGOs for giving their fund in the area of microfinance, promotion of income –generating activities, health and education services, community mobilization, right awareness, disaster preparedness and disaster management operation (Khan, 2015). Even, NGOs are considered as the major sources of foreign donor investment in the field of poverty reduction strategy in Bangladesh (Peters (Petras, 1999). On the other hand, different international governing bodies including the United Nations, The World Bank, etc. have premised that third world governments are corrupt,

ineffective, and unable of delivering many essential social and economic services for their citizen. So, they choose NGOs for providing services to poor, instead of state services (Karim, 2001). On the other hand, Foreign donors prefer to transfer their funds through NGOs than public sectors because they consider the public sector as slow, rigid, hierarchic and insensitive towards local needs and problems (Jamil, 1998). Moreover, public sector needs lengthy formal process to receive the foreign fund where NGOs are more flexible to receive foreign funds and can quickly take appropriate strategy to meet the local needs and demand. At present; NGOs are increasing continuously with the support of foreign aid in the forms of resources, ideas, and human resources.

4. Types of NGOs in Bangladesh

Lewis identifies two types of NGOs, (a) Northern NGOs refers to who's originated from industrialized countries or developed countries (Lewis, 2010) (b) Southern NGOs refers to the organization from less developed countries. According to the World Bank, NGOs are classified with two types, Operational NGOs (works with the plan and implementation of development-related projects) and Advocacy NGOs (support for the specific cause).

There are three types of NGOs in Bangladesh: (a) Local NGOs refer to small types of NGOs working in a small area especially cover the community level to the limited local area, (b) National NGOs refer to those activities extend in the whole country, and (c) International NGOs come from outside of the Bangladesh but they hire some of the local staffs.

On the basis of their fund collection, Jamil (1998) identifies three types of NGOs in Bangladesh, (a) NGOs which are purely of foreign origin; these NGOs directly operate their activities or support the local NGOs by giving only fun (Jamil, 1998). Most of these are Christian or charity origin, but they are now working for social welfare. Their fund has come from abroad and focal employees are foreigner (Jamil, 1998). These types of NGOs are guided by headquarters. Sometimes they make cooperation with local NGOs. (b) NGOs which are local but funded from abroad; they take technical supports from abroad. Most of the large NGOs such as BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), Proshika, GSS (Gono Shahajjya Sangstha) are these types. Their employees are professional and different from their client (c) A myriad of small NGOs which operate locally: They collect the fund both national and international donors. Some of them collect fund from local resources. Some of them are local voluntary agencies, local club. They are small and easily breakable.

5. The Emergence and Expansion of NGOs in Bangladesh:

Many researchers consider the development of NGO was initiated with the starting of British rule in this subcontinent. But the NGOs have been developed significantly since Pakistan period. The development of NGOs can be divided into some periods:

5.1 In British Period

Religious charity and Christian missionary and better of the members of the community organized school, mosques and relief was provided for the victims of natural disasters. In this time, voluntaries group includes Zamindar and Zamindar' families, land-based elite, and other religious group had emerged instinctively providing aid to the victims of flood, famine and epidemics (Haider, 2011). This was the self-service temporary activity without any proper structure and closed after the development of the condition. Christian missionaries were the first started charity work and social welfare services with proper institutionalize structure (Haider, 2011). Although their main intent was to spear Christian religion, they started their activity in remote and poverty-stricken areas, where they set up hospitals, schools, orphanages and so forth. Baptist Missionary Society was another one of oldest missionaries recognized in British period which has been working since 1979 (Haider, 2011). Christian Mission Hospital founded in Rajshahi in 1880 and the Kumudini Welfare Trust founded in 1944 that were reputed associations in British period mostly survived on the foreign fund. But they did not pursue the development of grassroots level.

5.2 Pakistan period

In the Pakistan period, the Pakistan Academy for Rural Development (PARAD), presently known as Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD), was established in 1956 for the development of the rural community. Due to the complexities of bureaucratic structure and government planning, their services could not reach the grass root levels (Haider, 2011). Cooperative organizations in village level formed by farmers such as Palli Mongal Samities, village welfare societies, and the village framer cooperative model played a vital role for in agricultural development. During the natural disasters, some non-governmental organization such as Co-operative for American Relief in Everywhere (CARE) and CARITAS (Christain Organization for Relief and Rehabilitation) had worked in sheltering people in the coastal area, those were displaced due to the tidal waves between 1960 and 1970 (Haider, 2011). In Bangladesh, both the local and international NGOs started their activities to provide relief and rehabilitation after the 1970 cyclone and their activities enhance after the liberation period (Haider, 2011).

5.3 Post liberation period

The historical background of NGOs in post-liberation period can be categorized in the following discussion-

5.5.1 First generation (1971-1972): After 1971 liberation war, the government of Bangladesh, faced difficulties to resettle at least ten million people with poor resources, neither had sufficient capacity nor had enough finance to deal with this war affected people in single handed (Ahsan, 2005). Besides that, the Pakistani

army destroyed physical infrastructures such as bridges, roads, highways, and rail tracks. The whole country was distorted into various parts and it was very difficult to reach government support to the remote places.

At this time, NGOs in Bangladesh emerged to undertake relief and rehabilitation activities to reduce the suffering of the war victim's people and to develop the physical infrastructure of this country. In that time, their prior operation was to distribute food, medicine, blankets, cloths, etc. Among the war affected people. Some NGO origin from outside of the Bangladesh, for example, Terred des Hommes supported the unwanted children of the war. At this time, some indigenous NGOs such as BRAC, Proshika, Ganoshastho Kendro (GK), Gono Shahajya Sangstha (GSS), Nijera Kori, and the Association for Social Advancement (ASA) were established (Karim, 2001). For example, Gano Shastya was a well reputed a mobile medical unit, provided medical support to the freedom fighters in 1971, RDRS provided post-war rehabilitation services and supports and developed transpiration facility in the north-west region and BRAC provided the necessary relief and rehabilitation to the community of fishermen in the north-east (Zohir, 2004).

5.5.2 Second generation (1973-75): For the impact of globalization and transfer of state power, the role of NGO has been changed and emphasized on integrated community development programs. By receiving foreign funds, NGO sectors emergent with the strongest role in development self-reliant local development sectors. At this time, Swanirvar Bangladesh (SB) was established to increase agricultural production and attain self-sufficiency to the deprive people and played an effective role in mobilizing youth in rural areas and small towns to reduce pilferage in the delivery of relief and development services through government channels (Zohir, 2004). But disfavoring the relief activities, NGOs have transformed themselves to create an effective organizational mechanism for performing work at the grass-roots level especially for the poor because they realized that merely relief efforts do not solve the problem of the poor (Haider, 2011). For that reason, their activities expanded to rehabilitation program such as agriculture, fisheries, livestock, cooperatives, health and family planning, adult education, vocational training, etc) (Haider, 2011).

5.5.3 Third generation (1976-to date): First phase: (1976-1990): Firstly, the civil society and NGOs played the important role in establishing anti-political military rule ideology and democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Secondly, many NGOs were developed to achieve the financial capability of the marginal group of people and at the time of martial law under president Zia, civil society could not play the very active role beyond some professional outburst of anger and protest against the new political order. But civil society was very active against Ershad's regime. A large number of civil societies had emerged to lurch against Ershad's doctrines such as labor and peasant associations, Bar Associations, Student Organizations, The SKOP (Unity Council of Workers and Employees) and so on. The Hindu-Buddha-Christian Oikya Parishad, various cultural and professional groups, etc were played a significant role against him. Civil

society played a major role to the end of Ershad regime too. Through the anti-autocracy movement in 1990, the civil society was developed and extended their works in Bangladesh. At that time, many organization like the rights of women in society committee, help to law-abiding committee, emancipation of woman society, crime reporters associations, democracy watch was growth.

5.6 Second phase (1990-to date):

After 1990, NGO sectors were rapidly increased because foreign assistance is available at that time. Similarly, some of the donors have established some the specific fund for supporting specific NGOs only. In this time, NGOs have turned into enhance their activities to maximize profit as fisheries projects, fertilizer supply, animal husbandry services, and handicrafts to more recent initiatives like banking, garment manufacturing, retail outlets, telecommunications, and so forth (Devine, 2006). In many political issues, civil society has broad participation. NGOs work to increase environmental awareness, women empowerment, and preservation of biological diversity. By using and developing electronic media, civil society creates public opinion in particular issues. Civil society has the great enterprise in the formation of the Care Taker Government, changing government in 1996 as well as 2001 and to mitigate extreme political crisis and conflict in 2006, those made the civil society was special identity in Bangladesh. After 1990, Awami League and (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) BNP supported civil society, two different and opposite civil society has been observed. Researchers remarked that in the political issues, the civil society has great political division. Particularly, civil society has played an important role to change the political scenario in the context of 1/11 in Bangladesh.

6. Positive aspect of NGOs

NGOs are now considered as the third sectors that come forward to provide social services to people of this country. NGOs have achieved greater success in case of developing the socioeconomic condition in the remote rural area whether the government failed to reach this area. The main aim of NGOs are to develop the socio-economic condition, becoming very close to the government, and working as services provider besides the government. Sometimes, many government departments hire NGOs for delivering their services. For example, NGOs are supporting the government policies and programs; mobilize resources in many development agenda as like as health, education, poverty reduction, etc. NGOs have undertaken many researches in our country in various aspects to understand the present situation, find out the problems and opportunities. They share result with the government and on the basis of this result, they give suggestion to upgrade the government policy (Ball & Dunn, 1995).

NGOs are becoming potential forces for social and economic development in Bangladesh. It has become the essential partners for national level development. They are working to raise awareness, especially enable people

to participate in recognizing their needs in national level (Ball & Dunn, 1995).

Lewis identifies three major roles of NGOs which are the implementer, catalyst, and partner. The implementer role of NGOs deals with the mobilization of the resources for providing goods and services to target people, especially to the disadvantaged and marginalized people. NGOs are giving services in many fields such as healthcare, microfinance, agricultural extension, emergency relief, and human rights. In the time of natural disaster or manmade emergency, the government and donors need the assistance of NGOs for providing necessary support to overcome such bad situation. After the independence, there arose a general understanding that infrastructure development programs were not appropriate for the rural poor, NGO sector in Bangladesh have shifted to services delivery programs from social mobilization or community activism. Now, NGOs are providing food aid, credit, health care, and education to the poor people.

The catalyst role refers to the NGOs' capacity to motivate and contribute to social transformation. They are conducting many activities likely as grassroots organizing and group formation, gender and empowerment work, lobbying and advocacy work, and attempts to influence wider policy processes through innovation, and policy entrepreneurship. They are operating many projects for the transformation toward gender equality in Bangladesh. NGOs are now operating intervention to train up the School Management Committee (SMC) members and primary school teachers on gender issues (DeJaeghere & Wiger, 2013). NGOs' microcredit program enhances the women empowerment in the rural area. In Bangladesh, women are considered as subordinate to male and could not exercise the equal right to participate in the economic, social, cultural, civil and political position. Most of the women have the marginal position in the society; especially in rural areas they have few access to educational services, health care, economic activities and so on. Women in Bangladesh they engaged in many activities like that supervision of crops, livestock rearing, fisheries, forestry, energy and family (domestic chores as cleaning, cooking, childcare, fetching water and so on) (Islam, Ahmed, & Alam, 2014). These types of activities cannot enhance the women position or their contribution is unacknowledged. Evidence supports that if women are engaged in economic activities; their social conditions also raise the family and society. So, NGOs are giving loan without any collateral to the women so that they can start income generation activities. Group lending or microcredit programs provided by NGO not only increase economic condition of the rural women but also increases the social, economic and political empowerment to the rural women. Women who are participating in group savings and credit programs can start small-scale income generation activities and this economic sustain leads to social and economic empowerment.

The partner role refers to cooperative activities NGOs working with the government, donors and the private sectors, such as providing support in many program or project, starting many socially business. Now, NGOs and

the government simultaneously working in many fields such as poverty alleviation, micro-credit provision, health and family planning, education and training, rural empowerment, disaster management, water supply and sanitation etc (Haque, 2004). Moreover, NGOs are now become the partner in many simple assignments like as agriculture, irrigation, livestock, fisheries, forestry, housing, population control, environment. For example, BRAC started partnership with government in the area of empowering women and income generation activities for vulnerable women (Haque, 2004). Similarly, the government began to work in partnership with Proshika in agricultural cooperative system, especially in irrigation program whether rural poor could hold irrigation equipment. The Nobel Prize winner Grameen bank has given loan without collateral for income generation activities to the poor and poverty reduction. Government has supported this microcredit program and formed collaboration with the Grameen Bank for the development of the microcredit scheme.

The Government and NGOs jointly have been worked to improve classroom and teaching condition in both government and of NGO schools under The Primary Education Development Program (1997–2002). NGOs are still working to eradicate illiteracy, especially work for children's education, particularly in girls' education. BRAC has started with the collaboration with government in the education sector, has started satellite school system based on the informal education system. BRAC has provided basic education to almost 10 million Bangladeshi students

Bangladesh government is weak for giving support to her large population in terms of health care facility, especially in the rural poor. The government and NGOs are working together to provide health care services for the poor especially to disadvantaged rural poor (Ullah, 2006). The Government and NGO partnership is successful in the health sector, especially in health, nutrition, and family planning. For example, the Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project jointly is run by the government, the community, and NGOs (Haque, 2004). Government and NGO partnership is effective in the area of malnutrition and the underprivileged people living in slums (Haque, 2004). The Bangladesh government and NGOs working together in family planning program that offers awareness including maintaining small family size, direct education about the sexual transmitted disease and distribution of contraceptives from doors to doors visit and motivational activities as well as reproductive health care and surgical services of rural women and urban slums in Bangladesh.

7. Negative aspect of NGOs

The working sectors of NGOs, especially in the rural areas, are microcredit, health care, education and so on for a long time. So the existing rural people are depending on the NGOs services. Likewise, NGOs have made a dependency network for economic and social services and tied the poor to maintain the network. "This relationship allows the NGO to inaugurate itself as

the friend of the poor. Through rallies and other gatherings, the NGO speaks for the poor—but careful consideration will show that this voice is the voice of the patron—in a patron-client relationship” (Karim, 2001).

Moreover, poor people have little capacity to bargain with NGO at the time of getting loan. NGOs have full autonomy to choose selective poor in terms of providing loan and services. They give the loan who are able to pay the interest with installment. Even, they only give their services who are the receiver of the microcredit but they give no consideration those are not receiver. That’s means that the NGOs are not accessible organization for all the poor.

So, sometimes some NGO’s microcredit scheme have no difference than formal banking system and emergence as a parallel banking system. Some NGOs are giving loan with high interest which is losing their philanthropic image. They give pressured to pay the weekly installment.

The some NGOs For example, the Grameen bank most leading microfinance institution in Bangladesh are providing loan at 20 per cent interest charged. But the bank receives foreign grants and taking loan in foreign donors at two percent loan (Mallick, 2012). Despite this, Grameen banks 20 percent loans is higher (8-10 percent) than the commercial bank. These types of activities losing their philanthropic image and represent the commercial activities. Moreover some, Bangladeshi NGOs are bogus and are defrauding the people (Abed, 2000).

So, NGOs have huge manpower especially in the remote area. They have the capacity to influences the local and national politics. For example, 1996 the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADB), arranged a rally against the BNP government where Over 100,000 people attend in this rally, give pressure to the region the government and established the Care Taker government for ensuring fair election process (Devine, 2006). At this time, they have been provided voter education services to more than 20 million citizens and encouraging participating in the election process. At this time, some of NGOs actively campaigned on behalf of AL .In this time AL was wined the election and increased their seats 88 to 145.

On the other hand, ADAB campaigned against the Jamaat-e-Islami, a leading Islamic party in Bangladesh, given the level that they are fundamentalist and discouraged to voter to give the vote to fundamentalist. As a result, Jamaat-e-Islami suffered very losses in the election, found only two seats where previously they have 18 seats. NGO may control the large voter bank in rural area (Karim, 2001).

International donors and agencies like as World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), International Finance Corporation (IFC), Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Food Programme (WFP), and United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO) have pressured Bangladesh government to work with NGOs. Even, they are pressured Bangladesh government to reduce their control over NGOs.

8. Conclusion

Finally, NGO operation in are complex, multi-dimensional and changeable in Bangladesh. It is very difficult to generalize their activity and performances. Despites many problems and difficulties of the NGOs, they have the notable success in rural development and poverty reduction (Khurshed, 2014). They have also another successful effort to give the credit to the rural poor while the traditional banking system failed in 1970 to 1990 (McGregor, 1994). They have played a significant role in social development and make stable position as a stable player in this country. So, in conclusion, it is revealing that NGOs’ activity in Bangladesh is positive and good. (Khan, 2015)

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