Is NGO Peacebuilding Risk-Free? A Case Study on Bangladesh

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The official end of armed hostilities between insurgents and the Bangladesh military in 1997, post-conflict development interventions by international donors and the Government of Bangladesh, along with a greater emphasis on local ownership over peacebuilding interventions, as expressed in the Rangamati Declaration (1998), have given birth to the onset of NGO peacebuilding in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). This article argues that the aid flow has not only transformed community-based organizations into project-based local NGOs, but has also bred a new generation of profit-oriented and donor-driven local NGOs. This article concludes that NGO implementation of development projects and advocacy for human rights, despite being mostly effective in its identification of local needs, is severely affected by three major risk factors: legitimacy, security, and sustainability.

Keywords   local ownership, NGO peacebuilding, legitimacy, security, sustainability

Introduction

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is located in the south-eastern corner of Bangladesh and composed of three hill districts—Bandarban, Khagrachhari, and Rangamati. This region, bordered by India to the north and Myanmar to the east, is the home of eleven distinct indigenous groups: Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Mro, Tanchangya, Bawm, Khumi, Khiyang, Lushai, Pankho, and Chak. Recent political history of the region has been shaped by an ethnic conflict which dates back to at least the British colonial period, despite it reaching its peak in the period just after Bangladesh's independence in 1971, and has continued for more than two decades with widespread violence, massacres, gross human rights violations, and large-scale conflict-induced displacement. The armed conflict came to an end in 1997 when the Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord,[1] also known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, was signed between the Government of Bangladesh and Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanhati Samiti (PCJSS)[2] on behalf of the indigenous

peoples of the region (Cunnington et al. 2014; Jamil and Panday 2008; Amnesty International 2013, 11-17; Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission 1991).

The most striking result of the Accord was the onset of peacebuilding interventions by local, national, and international actors in the region (Gerharz 2002). The international community, under the coordination of the United Nations Development Programme Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Facility (UNDP-CHTDF),[3] initiated the largest post-conflict reconstruction project in 2003 with $US 160.05 million. The Government of Bangladesh announced a development scheme of approximately $US 48,265,732 (Chakma 2013; Mohsin 2003) aimed at expanding the capacity of key local institutions such as the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council (CHTRC) and three Hill District Councils (HDCs), assisting the recovery of the conflict-ravaged economy, and reducing poverty, illiteracy, and malnutrition, etc. (Interview with an informant on June 23, 2016 in Rangamati). But an important question of who will be the legitimate peacebuilding actors in articulating local needs came to the forefront. The spirit of establishing local ownership over the CHT peacebuilding process was expressed in the Rangamati Declaration (1998),[4] and, more importantly, a large volume of aid has laid the context for breeding a number of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the post-conflict period (Interview with an informant on June 25, 2016 in Rangamati). The effect of aid on the growth and expansion of NGOs, as observed in Bosnia and Kosovo, can be explained in the language of McMahon, author of *The NGO Game*. According to McMahon (2017), international actors mostly rely on NGOs in the post-conflict reconstruction phase.

It is important to note that NGO peacebuilding in the CHT is nothing new in terms of the global landscape as there are currently 700 NGOs working in twenty-one conflict-ridden areas throughout the world (Hayman 2013; Richmond and Carey 2005). Academically, there is also a growing body of literature on NGO peacebuilding including studies by the World Bank (2007), McMahon (2017), and many others. But the CHT is still an unexplored interesting case of NGO peacebuilding (Gerharz 2000) which can offer new insights with regards to NGO peacebuilding. This article argues that aid flow has not only transformed community-based organizations into project-based local NGOs, but it has also bred a new generation of profit-driven local NGOs within the region. The central thesis of this investigation is that NGO peacebuilding, despite being mostly effective in the identification of local needs, implementation of development projects, and advocacy for human rights, is severely affected by three key risk factors: legitimacy, security, and sustainability in the post-conflict society of the CHT.

This article is structured as follows. First, it illustrates concepts and theories related to local peacebuilding and the role of NGOs in the peace process. Second, it explains the way in which this study was carried out in the CHT with condensed but detailed accounts of sampling, data collection strategy, and data

analysis methods. Third, it explores how international aid flow has brought radical social transformation to the post-conflict CHT by converting community-based organizations into project-based NGOs and generating a large number of profit-driven local NGOs. Fourth, it assesses the performance and areas of NGO peacebuilding in the context of the CHT. Fifth, it explores three key risk factors of NGO peacebuilding in the CHT—legitimacy, security, and sustainability—through triangulating primary data with secondary sources of information. Finally, the article concludes by bridging all of the above.

Theory and Concepts

The concept of peacebuilding is now a global reality and has been shaped by the post-conflict reconstruction activities of a myriad of actors, ranging from governments and international organizations to civil society and grassroots actors, since the 1990s. Due to the drawbacks of traditional (diplomatic) methods of peacebuilding, the focus of the international community has shifted from engaging state actors to strengthening grassroots actors, which includes NGOs (Hayman 2013; Walton 2008; Hilhorst and van Leeuwen 2005). Generally, local peacebuilding places an emphasis on rebuilding the relationship between conflicting parties and realizing a long-term commitment to the communities affected by conflict (Lewer 1999, 12). Local NGOs are mostly considered to be reliable grassroots peacebuilding partners in conflict-ridden societies because of their local expertise and wide access to institutions at the local level, in addition to their ability to articulate local interests (Fuest 2010, 6). Furthermore, the low cost and efficiency of project implementation, absence of bureaucratic problems, and autonomy in decision-making increase the legitimacy and sustainability of local peacebuilding through NGOs (Richmond and Carey 2005; Ross and Rothman 1999, 1). Among many other conflict-ravaged countries, Liberia has benefited from NGO workshops which have covered a vast array of issues relating to the broader theme of peacebuilding such as reconciliation, gender mainstreaming, good governance, and youth leadership through the participation of people from all sections of the society (Fuest 2010, 12). Colombia is another exemplary case of the four specific categories of NGO peacebuilding interventions. First, NGOs were found to be capable of building networks for identifying common agendas within human rights and different dimensions of peace. Second, they put pressure on the government through lobbying and advocacy to provide both human rights protections and peaceful resolution of conflict at the national and international level. Third, they facilitated peace mobilization aimed at reducing effects of armed conflict on vulnerable groups of the society. Fourth, they supported dialogue and peace processes and encouraged international diplomacy (Abozaglo 2009, 8-10). NGOs also played a crucial role in peacebuilding in Haiti, acting as health service

providers and development organizations. Human rights advocacy organizations had active role in Serbia and community-based peacebuilders did the same in Northern Ireland (Stephenson and Zanotti 2012, 2).

However, NGO peacebuilding has a dark side, as most of the local NGOs are community-based in many conflict settings, which means that they are directly involved in the process of ethnic boundary demarcation (Gerharz 2002). In the case of the Balkans, one NGO revived ethnic and political identities of local communities through advocacy, and thus hardened the process of reconciliation (Stephenson and Zanotti 2012, 3). Sri Lanka also has mixed record when it comes to NGO activities. For instance, the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, the Tamils Rehabilitation Organization, and the Foundation for Co-existence are all essentially mono-ethnic and hence controversial to Singhalese Buddhist groups (Walton 2008; Orjuela 2005, 4-7). Northern Ireland also has a similar experience, since many NGOs work for a single group aimed at improving the livelihoods of economically marginalized sections in insulated areas (Cochrane 2000, 8). These devastating consequences of NGO peacebuilding became news in the 1990s, after which many scholars have critically assessed the actual and perceived performance of NGO peacebuilding, taking into account a number of indicators such as engagement with local communities, accountability, autonomy, commercialization, and ideological and political influence (Stephenson and Zanotti 2012, 3; Goodhand 2006; Reimann 2005).

In spite of all this, NGOs have significantly contributed to the peace process of many countries such as Haiti, Liberia, and Colombia. This investigation advances with three central theoretical propositions to build on the existing academic literature on the pitfalls of NGO peacebuilding. First, local NGOs occupy a narrow space in the peace process on account of post-conflict sensitivity and hard-line policies by the government. Second, non-state actors also create trouble in NGO peacebuilding by creating insecurity. Third, NGO peacebuilding interventions are mainly short-term, project-driven, donor-engineered and, as a result, unsustainable. In addition, there exist multiple in-built problems such as outright donor-dependency, elite capture, funding crises, and lack of coordination among local NGOs. These three sets of theory-driven assumptions have been examined through the triangulation of secondary literature with first-hand empirical data from a case study on NGO peacebuilding of the CHT.

Methodology of the Study

The study has been carried out through in-depth interviews since this qualitative research strategy equips the researcher with the ability to gain a comprehensive understanding of the processes of war and peacebuilding (Brouneus 2011). Prior to the fieldwork, I communicated with three gatekeepers from the three districts

of the CHT to identify local NGOs, establish relevant contacts, and build rapport and trust with the staff of these NGOs. After I finalized a list of dominant local NGOs with the help of these gatekeepers, I commenced my fieldwork in the three districts of the CHT from June 18, 2016 to July 4, 2016. The sample size, which is composed of individuals of different genders as well as diverse educational, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, was not pre-determined. Interviews continued until the researcher reached the saturation point. Before starting each interview, I received the informed and voluntary consent of all interviewees to use the provided information and data for academic purposes, but promised to ensure confidentiality so that the research process does not affect their security and organizational activities. After wrapping up my fieldwork, I transcribed all of the tape-recorded interviews into text and read aloud these texts line-by-line repeatedly in search of emerging codes and themes. Finally, I filtered and identified relevant codes and themes in line with the central research question of whether the NGO peacebuilding is risk-free in the post-conflict society of the CHT.

Post-Conflict Social Transformation in the CHT: Community-Based Organizations to Project-Based and Profit-Driven Local NGOs

Local NGOs as reliable grassroots actors work in different forms of partnership with international donors, as is observed in multiple case studies such as Bosnia, Kosovo, Haiti, and Sri Lanka (McMahon 2017; Stephenson and Zanotti 2012, 2; Walton 2008, 134; Orjuela 2005). The CHT displays a similar form of peacebuilding partnership between donors and local agents. In this article, I argue that international aid flow has brought radical social transformation in the post-conflict CHT in two social dimensions.

Community-Based Voluntary Organizations to NGOs
Prior to the CHT Accord, a good number of missionaries and community-based organizations had an active presence in the CHT, although there is no accurate source of statistics on the exact number of organizations (Gerharz 2000). In response to the question of how community-based volunteer organizations came to be in the region and how they turned into project-driven NGOs, one of the founders of the Humanitarian Foundation reported that a group of educated persons dedicated to social development in Bandarban started their voluntary social work through the establishment of a public library and publication of an annual magazine aimed at making local communities conscious of the positive impacts of education (Interview with a founder of the Humanitarian Foundation on June 21, 2016 in Bandarban). These constructive social activities of the library-based volunteer organization gained popularity and cognitive legitimacy within

local communities. Eventually this community-based organization turned into a project-driven local NGO in the post-Accord period when it received funding for a project aimed at the protection and promotion of the culture of indigenous peoples from Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA). This partnership with DANIDA enriched its position by opening a new avenue of funding from the Manusher Janno Foundation, the Aronok Foundation, and the Government of Switzerland for work on maternal health, which first started as a health service at the Upazila (sub-district) level in 2009 as a local NGO. Khagrapur Mohila Kallayan Songstha, based in Khagrachhari, described a similar story when asked the same question.

> We established our social organization before the CHT Accord using a small amount of funds from membership fees. Initially we focused on adult education and were self-financed. Interestingly it was the year of 2000 when Nari Pragoti Sangha (a national women organization of Bangladesh) was looking for a local women organization based in Khagrachhari that we established an NGO in response to the needs of the donor. This donor selected four local NGOs, namely, Milonpur Mohila Samiti, Zabarang, Pajeroko, and Khagrapur Mohila Kallyan Samiti. We received a very small project grant which was worth $BDT 180,000. The donor also provided us knowledge on the concept of NGOs and even capacity-building trainings in Dhaka and Khagrachhari (Interview with an executive director of a local NGO on July 4, 2016 in Khagrachhari).

Rangamati also witnessed the transformation of community-based organizations into project-based local NGOs. It can be asserted that active community-based voluntary organizations across the three districts transformed into project-based NGOs in order to address donors' needs, but that their organizational transformation takes place through a legalization and institutionalization process, implying that they registered with two distinct state institutions: the Department of Social Welfare and the NGO Bureau of Bangladesh (Interview with an informant on June 25, 2016 in Rangamati). This finding of the study is consistent with the argument made by Hayman (2013), according to whom an injection of external resources can result in NGO business and the replacement of the non-financial motivations of local organizations with financial incentives through the process of "professionalization"—meaning that key staff members of organizations work for peacebuilding in exchange for market-appropriate salaries rather than voluntary engagement.

Profit-Driven Organizations: The New Generation of NGOs
The concept of NGOs was totally new among local communities who had started their NGO activities without prior knowledge, experience, vision, or a mission. In fact, these NGOs did not have specialization, capacity, infrastructure, or well-articulated organizational strategies on how to contribute to peacebuilding

(Gerharz 2002). In addition, they have emerged in the CHT without any role model for what kind of NGO they should establish. Though there are many big national NGOs like Grameen Bank, BRAC, and Proshika in Bangladesh, these national NGO models are not suitable in the context of the CHT (ibid.; Chakma 2017). A top-level official of the Centre for Integrated Programme and Development (CIPD) has described his experience in the NGO sector as follows:

> My generation has started NGO activities in the CHT, and you can see most of the executive directors of local NGOs are young. In the post-Accord period, a good number of international donors have entered this region with the intention to work toward post-conflict reconstruction. At the outset of the partnership with donors, we received very small-scale projects and funding. Currently we are working with many donors such as UNICEF and the Manusher Janno Foundation. We have already spent a decade on this work but still have not attained sufficient institutional maturity in understanding how NGO interventions work (Interview with an informant on June 19, 2016 in Bandarban).

It is clear from his statement that local NGOs of the CHT are mostly donor-driven rather than local demand-driven.

NGO Peacebuilding in the CHT

This study argues that NGOs perform four roles with regards to peacebuilding in the CHT: identifying local needs, empowering local people through advocacy, and resisting human rights violations and land grabs. These findings are explained below.

Identifying and Addressing Local Needs

External actors are unable to establish contacts to directly initiate post-conflict development interventions at the local level for a number of reasons, such as access, legitimacy, and post-conflict sensitivity. Here lies the significance of the role of local NGOs, which work as "proxy clients" for opening and maintaining communication channels between local communities and donors (Crowther 2001). It has been found that local NGOs work with both sides in the CHT, local communities and donors, by conducting consultation workshops and needs assessment surveys at the community level and providing information about local needs at the donor level when designing their development projects (Chakma 2013; Cunnington 2014; Chakma 2017). Moreover, NGOs run donor-driven development activities, by which they provide an alternative to the war economy, support repatriation and demobilization, address development needs of local communities, and cultivate harmonious inter-group relationships (Bush 2001). The thesis proposed by Bush (ibid.) is relevant to the case of the CHT, where most

people are still deprived of public services due to the decade-long insurgency and their residence in remote areas. Local NGOs try to reach these deprived and marginalized groups through development project activities (Interview with an informant on June 20, 2016 in Bandarban). Currently, fifty-two registered NGOs are working in the CHT on health, water, sanitation, agriculture, horticulture, fisheries, education, environment, and income generation training, etc. (Mohsin 2003, 80). Essentially, these organizations work on non-sensitive issues of peacebuilding, and this is articulated by a key staff member of Taimur, while addressing how his NGO works toward the education of deprived indigenous groups:

> We started our voluntary activities with a special focus on education for twenty-two Mrong community villages in Alikadam Upazila, Bandarban District. We bought a piece of land for building a student hostel. Our great contribution is to produce several doctors and government employees for the society. Currently, many are studying in different Bangladeshi universities, and many others have also migrated to Sri Lanka, Australia, and India after completing their higher education (Interview with an informant on June 20, 2016 in Bandarban).

Local NGOs have also set up tube-wells in many villages of the region as part of their project interventions relating to sanitation and water through the help of Union Parishad—the lowest administrative unit of Bangladesh (Interview with an informant on June 24, 2016 in Rangamati). Similar types of NGO peacebuilding interventions were implemented in different post-conflict contexts, examples ranging from Bosnia to Northern Ireland (McMahon 2017; Hancock 2008). Apart from education, sanitation, and health programs, local NGOs of the CHT have also contributed to the economic empowerment of local communities through creating employment opportunities and providing training to local peoples in income generating activities and in the use of bank loans in productive sectors (Cunnington et al. 2014, 34-36).

Social Awareness through Advocacy and Campaigning
There are a large number of NGOs and professional organizations, namely, the National Peace Council, the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, and the Centre for Policy Alternative, which are working toward peace in Sri Lanka by means of peace education and media outreach (Orjuela 2005, 5). In the case of Nigeria, women's groups have worked to mitigate internal conflicts, such as religious crises in Kano and Kaduna states, Bauchi and Plateau states, and Enugu-Ezike, through problem-solving workshops, seminars, and meetings aimed at removing misperceptions across ethnic and religious lines and improving inter-group relations (Uzuegbunam 2013). Previous studies have proved to be somewhat relevant in the case of the CHT, where NGO peacebuilding interventions took place in certain areas through capacity-building trainings and

social awareness campaigns regarding socio-legal issues such as gender-based violence. This study has also addressed the work of Annanya Kallayan Sangathan (AKS), which works with UNICEF on the prevention of child marriage and child abuses in Bandarban. They have had a great impact on raising social awareness of laws relating to child rights and the negative impacts of child marriage and child labor (Chakma 2017).

Resisting Land Grabs and Human Rights Violations
Despite donors mostly focusing on non-controversial issues such as health sector (Gerharz 2002, 3) and government's surveillance on NGO activities (Mohsin 2003), several local NGOs have played an important role in the protection and promotion of the human rights of indigenous peoples. For instance, the Lama Upazila, Bandarban District has been experiencing large-scale land grabs by different companies in the post-Accord period. With the financial support of DANIDA, a local NGO constituted village associations in every village and union of Lama Upazila, continued its advocacy against land grabs, and observed a series of strikes aimed at protecting the lands of indigenous peoples from illegal acquisition (Chakma 2017). In addition, a local NGO is currently working in Bandarban on eighteen cases of sexual violence and her donor is providing $BDT 5000, or $US 59.58, per case as legal costs for the duration of six months (Interview with a local informant on June 19, 2016 in Bandarban). Annanya Kallayan Songathan (AKS), another local NGO, has a very influential role in settling domestic violence disputes in indigenous families under traditional laws, since taking suits before a formal court is very expensive for local residents (ibid.).

Is NGO Peacebuilding Risk-Free? Key Lessons from Bangladesh

The previous section illustrates how NGOs are contributing to peacebuilding in the CHT. However, NGO peacebuilding is severely affected by three principal risk factors in the context of the post-conflict CHT. First, the hard-line policy of the government shaped by the notion of national security has complicated NGO activities and thus created a crisis for the legitimacy of NGO peacebuilding in Bangladesh. Second, local NGOs are concerned with their physical security when they do their fieldwork. Third, NGO peacebuilding in the CHT is contested from the perspective of sustainability. These three risk-factors of NGO-led peacebuilding of the CHT are explained below.

Legitimacy of NGO Peacebuilding
This article defines the legitimacy of NGO peacebuilding as the socially and legally accepted processes by which NGOs maintain their working relationships with different stakeholders, such as local communities, donors, and governments

(Walton 2008). There are four categories of NGO legitimacy: normative legitimacy, cognitive legitimacy, regulatory legitimacy, and programmatic legitimacy (Lister 2003), but this investigation has found only regulatory legitimacy (legal obligations and restrictions) and cognitive legitimacy (social judgmental under-standing about whether NGO activities are appropriate) in the context of the post-conflict CHT. Broadly speaking, the Government of Bangladesh has recently branded twenty local NGOs working in the CHT as anti-government elements (Interview with an informant on June 25, 2017 in Rangamati). The *Daily Star*, one of the leading newspapers of Bangladesh, reported on December 21, 2011 that the Standing Committee on the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs had made a policy to strictly monitor NGO activities in the region (*Daily Star* 2011). This study has produced a number of dominant narratives regarding how the Government of Bangladesh enforces its hard-line policy and how that creates a crisis of legitimacy in NGO peacebuilding. An interviewee who shared his personal experience indicated that his NGO was suspended by the government on the basis of a fabricated accusation claiming that his NGO spoils communal harmony in the CHT. High government officials from the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs and the NGO Bureau visited his NGO office in the name of investigation, but their intention was only to exert bureaucratic pressure and extort a bribe from his organization. This type of targeted and systematic harassment not only demoralizes local NGOs but also narrows the space for local NGOs in peacebuilding (Interview with an informant on June 24, 2016 in Rangamati). This study also found similar state behavior in Bandarban, where a local NGO was accused of converting local people to Christianity despite the organization's policy of "no religious affiliation" in its organizational activities (Interview with an informant on June 21, 2016 in Bandarban). In response to the question of how NGOs face state restrictions and harassment in performing their routine activities, one NGO worker described it in the following manner:

> We are deliberately harassed when we go to the police station for filing complaints and a case against sexual harassment. Basically, we face different types of pressure and restrictions when we deal with such sexual violence cases in which the victims are indigenous women and the perpetrators are from the Bengali community. Then we are labeled as a communal organization but we think a victim is a victim irrespective of her ethnic, religious, or political affiliation (Interview with an informant on July 1, 2016 in Khagrachhari).

The case of the CHT is consistent with experiences in Colombia, where NGOs are stigmatized, threatened, and intimidated by the government (Abozaglo 2009, 12). Another participant of the study also informed the researcher that local NGOs are pressured to recruit more Bengali staff members in their NGOs, but Bengali employees cannot go on field visits to the remote project areas due to security concerns and the language barrier (Interview with an informant on June

19, 2016 in Bandarban).

How, then, does the government de-legitimize NGO activities in the CHT? The Government of Bangladesh issued a ban in January 2015 on the entry of foreign researchers into the CHT, a ban which was severely criticized by eminent citizens of the country (*Daily Star* 2015). One participant of this study puts it this way:

> We are registered by the NGO Bureau of Bangladesh based on an intelligence report. Recently the government has decided that donors must apply three months prior to visiting the CHT. Due to this administrative burden, donors withdraw their attention from the CHT. Thus, the government has created trouble for our activities at the grassroots level despite the fact that we are playing a complementary role in providing education, health, and other services (Interview with an informant on June 24, 2016 in Rangamati).

Participants of the study also explained why the government has taken a hard-line policy toward NGO interventions in the CHT. First, the issue of human rights is very sensitive for the government in the post-conflict context of the CHT, and several NGOs work on human rights related issues (Interview with an informant on June 21, 2016 in Bandarban). Second, local NGOs have collectively turned into a new powerhouse in the region due to their large role in mobilizing at the grassroots level through awareness programs such as advocacy, seminars, and workshops (Interview with an informant on June 23, 2016 in Rangamati). Third, indigenous peoples are becoming economically solvent, but the government has a tendency to suppress them economically and politically (Interview with an informant on June 24, 2016 in Rangamati). This research also uncovered few narratives in favor of the anti-NGO role of the government. First, the CHT suffered through a decade-long conflict, and the indigenous peoples and local NGOs still lack confidence in the government (Mohsin 2003, 79). Second, the Hill Tracts NGO Forum (HTNF) was established with political motives, which laid a legitimate ground for suspicion within the government of NGO activities (Interview with a local informant on June 21, 2016 in Bandarban). Third, several guerrilla leaders established local NGOs in the post-Accord period, and the government may perceive this as local NGOs giving financial support to armed groups in the CHT (Interview with an informant on June 25, 2016 in Rangamati). The secondary literature also suggests that foreign aid is viewed, in some cases, with suspicion during a post-conflict period, as is observed in Sri Lanka, since aid is used as a political weapon to legitimize putting pressure on recipient countries and threatening their sovereignty (Wickramasinghe 1997). Not only the government but a large portion of the Singhalese population believes foreign aid is financial aid to the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and hence NGOs are considered to be the "fifth column of the Tigers" (Walton 2014; Orjuela 2005). Other studies also report that aid diversion is not

new in peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance operations, as it has occurred in Sudan, Somalia, Syria, Ethiopia, Myanmar, and the Philippines (Lichtenheld 2014). Foreign aid, therefore, both intentionally and unintentionally, does more harm through sustaining the war economy, legitimatizing conflicting parties, and undermining local mechanisms of conflict resolution (Goodhand and Atkinson 2001).

Security of NGO Peacebuilding

The activities of aid workers in war-torn countries are risky, as the *Aid worker Security Report 2017* claims (Stoddard, Harmer, and Czwarno 2017). One of the main reasons behind the very limited space occupied by NGOs in the peace process is the legitimacy crisis and damage to their reputation as peacebuilders, as in Afghanistan (Walton 2014). The case of the CHT also reveals that NGO peacebuilding faces a legitimacy crisis, in addition to tremendous pressures from non-state armed actors. If they do not give extortion to armed groups, they cannot move to the implementation phase of their projects in many cases. This was seen when an armed group stopped NGO programs in Lakhichari Upazila, Khagrachhari district, and demanded money from local NGOs (Interview with an informant on July 2, 2016 in Khagrachhari). Furthermore, one program officer of DANIDA was abducted from Thanchi, Bandarban in 2008 by external insurgents with the help of some local miscreants (Interview with an informant on June 20, 2016 in Bandarban). It is also worth mentioning that three foreigners (two Danes and one Briton), who were employed in a Danish government-sponsored road construction project in the region, were abducted in February 2001 in Rangamati (BBC News 2001). Hence, it can be asserted that the security risk factor makes NGO efforts at peacebuilding in the CHT more difficult.

Sustainability of NGO Peacebuilding

Taking the sustainability debate of NGO peacebuilding (McMahon 2017) into consideration, this study explores how the case of the CHT is affected by the risk of sustainability which stems from four major sources: a funding crisis, elite capture, corruption, and the lack of coordination among local NGOs. These risk factors to the sustainability of peacebuilding in the CHT are illustrated below.

First, local NGOs have no financial or organizational capacity for working on many important local issues in the CHT since they are essentially project-based, profit-oriented, and donor-driven. To put it more simply, the post-conflict context of the CHT demands a reconciliation project, but local NGOs ironically work on other issues concerned with gender-based violence and climate change as international funding is available for these projects. This clearly implies that local NGOs in the CHT work in line with the interests and needs of donors, rather than context-specific demands (Chakma 2017). This is similar to the cases of Liberia, Sri Lanka, and Bosnia where NGOs are dependent on international

organizations and work under tremendous pressure coming from the donor side in order to produce short-term, quick, and unrealistically positive impacts to satisfy donors (McMahon 2017; Fuest 2010, 18; Orjuela 2005). Interviews were conducted at a time when almost all international aid has phased out and found that many local NGOs have stopped their activities in the region. A top official of the Gram Unnayan Sangathan (GRAUS), the leading local NGO of the Bandarban District, described how the funding crisis has affected the sustainability of his NGO: "Now the funding crisis is a great concern for our program and project sustainability. We had 700-800 staff members before, but now the number is around sixty or seventy. Many local NGOs have disappeared in the meantime due to the funding crisis, and we are also facing an uncertain future" (Interview with an informant on June 19, 2016 in Bandarban).

This study has found that many local NGOs, which have no access to their own income sources like micro-credit and other income-generating activities, cannot sustain themselves. It is also worth mentioning that NGOs face official restrictions when they start income generating activities. For instance, a local NGO in Khagrachhari began business activities through the production of honey, candles, and handicrafts but the government issued a notice to this NGO to stop its business without the registration of Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (Interview with an informant on July 2, 2016 in Khagrachhari). Moreover, the funding crisis of NGOs has already produced societal-level negative consequences, which are mostly visible in project-based schools where thousands of students are carrying out their studies. A participant of this study described this situation:

> Who will be liable for destroying the future of school-going children? Nobody has the right to destroy their lives and future. Now the UNDP is trying to hand over all these project-based schools to the three Hill District Councils of the CHT, but these administrative units have no organizational capacity to accommodate all these schools. Apart from this, many teachers are working in these schools. What will be their future? We have motivated local people to continue supporting these schools but the question is how many years will local people continue running these schools with their only capital being their self-motivation. Furthermore, people will not trust international donors in future due to their unsustainable projects and unplanned exit (Interview with an informant on June 19, 2016 in Bandarban).

Second, NGO peacebuilding has a well-kept record of performance, both on policy and paper, but their actual impacts are exaggerated (Goodhand 2006). A participant of this study told the researcher that local people were expected to be the actual beneficiaries of post-conflict development projects but the staffs of local NGOs are the true beneficiaries in practice, since they receive a large amount of project money in the name of administrative costs, training, field visits, and salary. Consequently, ordinary local people received a small and disproportionate

amount of development aid (Interview with an informant on June 19, 2016 in Bandarban). Previous studies also reveal this profit maximization trend within NGOs in Sri Lanka, where local NGOs work to earn money and meet foreign goals, rather than peace (Walton 2014; Hulme 1994). In the language of Walton (2014), NGOs are "crows who have come in search of dollar." NGOs are considered to be traders in the globally emerging billion-dollar industry that is the "peace market."

Third, the majority of the participants interviewed in this study identified corruption as a big problem for the sustainability of peacebuilding interventions. As reported by a local NGO, several officials of the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs demanded 2 percent of the total budget of one project as a bribe but this organization could not agree to give the bribe since it is not feasible for this NGO to work with the deficit in its budget (Interview with an informant on June 21, 2016 in Bandarban). Another local NGO also reported that the NGO Bureau takes bribes but it does not demand a fixed amount (Interview with an informant on June 23, 2016 in Rangamati). In addition, corruption takes place at the local level, since NGOs are encouraged to give a small amount of bribes to local administration when they apply for their clearance certificate from the local administrative unit (Interview with an informant on June 19, 2016 in Bandarban). Another side of corruption occurs at the community level, where non-state armed actors give shelter to corrupted Village Development Committee (PDC) officials in exchange for money and ideological support (Cunnington et al. 2014; Chakma 2013).

Fourth, local NGOs in the CHT lack coordination amongst themselves. Rather they are involved in a clash of interests. A participant of this study explained inter-NGO conflict as "development is not apart from politics." His NGO based in Rangamati received project funding from an international donor, but local NGOs of Bandarban did not allow his NGO to work in their district (Interview with a local informant on June 23, 2016 in Rangamati). NGOs are not only involved in inter-district conflict, but intra-district conflict as well, as articulated by a participant of this study:

> Our NGO has partnership with many local NGOs in Bandarban, and Annanya Kallyan Sangstha (AKS) is one of them. We have helped a number of Bandarban based local NGOs to establish themselves. Ironically, we now have conflicts of interest due to limited project funding with these local NGOs. There is no cooperation, mutual trust, and coordination among local NGOs (Interview with a local informant on June 20, 2016 in Bandarban).

The findings of this case study is similar to the situation in three countries—Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Occupied Palestinian Territories—where external donors have increased internal competition and inter-organizational conflict among

local NGOs (Walton 2014). Hence, it can be argued that NGO peacebuilding is a problematic process itself.

Conclusion

NGO activities were very limited in their scope compared to community-based organizations and missionaries prior to the CHT Accord. This scenario radically changed when the Government of Bangladesh and Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanhati Samiti (PCJSS) signed the CHT Accord in 1997. The romanticizing of local ownership over peacebuilding, as articulated in the Rangamati Declaration, has bred a large volume of project-based, aid-recipient, elite-captured, and entirely donor-driven NGOs which have started their organizational activities without any previous knowledge of the concept of an NGO. The injection of post-conflict development aid has also transformed community-based organizations of the CHT into completely profit-oriented and project-based NGOs. Positive impacts of these NGO activities are apparent in the areas which identify local needs, implement donor development agendas, improve social awareness on gender-based violence and child abuse, and provide limited-scale protection of human rights and social mobilization at the grassroots level. However, NGO peacebuilding in the CHT cannot escape constructive criticism coming from the perspectives of questioning of legitimacy, security, and sustainability of grassroots peacebuilding. As the findings of this study reveal, the government has a hardline policy against local NGOs despite the fact that NGOs play complementary roles in providing essential services like education, sanitation, and health services to local communities. On the contrary, non-state armed actors always threaten and demand extortion from staffs of local NGOs. Last but not least, NGO peacebuilding in the CHT is hard to conceive as a sustainable process since NGO interventions are mostly short-term and project-basis.

Notes

1.   The Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord (1997) is divided into four sections. The first section deals with general provisions related to the preservation of regional characteristics of the CHT and the formation of the implementation committee of the Accord whereas the second section is concerned with the formation, functions, and power of the three Hill District Councils (HDCs). The third section is focused on the formation, functions, and power of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council (CHTRC), the apex political institution of the region, while the fourth section contains provisions concerning general amnesty, rehabilitation of displaced peoples, and employment opportunities.
2.   The Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanhati Samiti (PCJSS) came into being in 1973 with four core demands: autonomy of the CHT, retention of the CHT Regulations, 1900,

preservation of traditional administrative systems, and prohibition on the settlement of Bengali-speaking people from plain lands of Bangladesh. These political demands were formulated under the leadership of Manabendra Narayan Larma but the Government of Bangladesh led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman rejected these political demands of indigenous peoples of the CHT in 1972.

3.   The United Nations Development Program Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Facility (UNDP-CHTDF) is the common platform of international community, and the European Union (EU) is the top contributor to this organization. The UNDP-CHTDF initiated post-conflict development interventions in 2003 with a budget of $US 160.05 million to build capacity of key local institutions of the CHT and assist the implementation process of the CHT Accord.

4.   The Rangamati Declaration was formulated through the Conference on Development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts held on December 18-19, 1998 which was attended by representatives from donors, members of the PCJSS, national political parties, local elected representatives, women groups, and civil society members. This Declaration emphasizes local participation, local consultation, and local ownership in the areas of development policy, land, natural resources, environment, education, and health, etc.

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