



The Role of Civil Society and Religious Organizations in Shaping Environmental Policy in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Research Problem: The intersection of religion, civil society, and public policy is an increasingly relevant area of study, particularly in the context of environmental degradation. In Bangladesh, the impacts of climate change, industrialization, and globalization have created significant environmental challenges. These challenges necessitate a critical examination of the role of civil society, including religious organizations, in addressing environmental issues. The key question is: How effectively is civil society, in conjunction with religious institutions, contributing to the environmental movement and influencing policy reform in Bangladesh?

Research purposes: This paper aims to explore the role of civil society, including the influence of religious organizations, in the environmental movement in Bangladesh. It seeks to understand how civil society organizations engage in advocacy, lobbying, stakeholder pressure, environmental impact assessments, and grassroots mobilization. The goal is to evaluate how these efforts shape public policy on environmental governance in a religious and sociopolitical context.

Research methods: : This study uses a qualitative, review-based approach, relying on secondary data from existing literature, media reports, and policy documents. It critically examines the involvement of civil society organizations in the environmental movement, with a focus on how religious values and institutions intersect with public policy efforts in Bangladesh's environmental governance.

Results and Discussion: The findings suggest that civil society organizations, including those with religious affiliations, play an important role in influencing environmental policy in Bangladesh. Through advocacy, lobbying, and public mobilization, these organizations have brought attention to critical environmental issues, facilitating public participation in environmental governance. However, challenges remain, including political biases and limited resources, which affect their ability to fully shape policy. Religious organizations have also been shown to contribute moral and ethical dimensions to environmental activism, aligning their values with sustainable development goals.

Research Implications and Contributions: The research underscores the importance of integrating religious organizations into the broader framework of civil society engagement in environmental governance. It highlights how religious values can complement public policy efforts, contributing to a more holistic approach to sustainable development. The paper provides recommendations for policymakers to strengthen collaboration between civil society, religious institutions, and government bodies to make environmental policy more effective and inclusive, aligning with the journal's scope of exploring the intersection of religion and public policy.

Keywords: Civil Society, Environmental Governance, Environmental Movement, Involvement.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the concept of sustainable development, particularly in relation to the environment, has become a critical focus of global discourse, with civil society playing a pivotal role. Since the 1970s, environmental politics have gained increasing international attention, beginning with the United Nations (UN) Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in June 1972, which catalyzed global

discussions on environmental issues (Sills, 1975, p.2). Subsequently, reports like the World Commission on Environment and Development's *Our Common Future* in 1987 and the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit further advanced these discussions, placing environmental challenges at the forefront of international and national policy agendas. These environmental challenges have transcended international politics, influencing local and national governance from both the global North and South.

With the advent of global environmental changes and the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), civil society and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have gained significant global importance. Civil society organizations are increasingly recognized as crucial actors in addressing environmental problems, as these issues require both regional and global approaches. In the context of sustainable development, environmental safety is essential because social and economic progress cannot be achieved without the preservation and responsible use of natural resources. This has necessitated the integration of environmental protection measures into state policy frameworks.

Bangladesh, in particular, faces acute challenges from climate change, which has had severe negative effects on the country. Climatological experts estimate that by 2050, more than 13 million people living in Bangladesh's coastal areas may lose their homes due to rising sea levels, increased salinity, and other climate-related impacts. This is a scenario echoed in many other low-lying regions globally (Imam, 2021). Over the past few decades, Bangladesh has suffered significant losses in natural capital, and environmental degradation has worsened. The annual economic losses from environmental damage are estimated to be around \$6.5 billion, or 3.4% of the country's GDP, with air and water pollution contributing to over 28% of all deaths in the country (World Bank, 2023).

Despite the existence of various environmental laws, policies, and the involvement of civil society—often in collaboration with international donor NGOs—the government of Bangladesh continues to implement development projects that frequently conflict with environmental protection. These projects often violate both international commitments to sustainable development and the interests of local populations. This situation raises critical questions: Can civil society truly play an effective role in protecting the environment in Bangladesh? What is the actual extent of civil society's involvement in environmental movements?

This study aims to explore and analyze the nature of civil society's involvement in the environmental movement in Bangladesh. The paper focuses on civil society's roles, including advocacy for environmental justice, the collection and dissemination of environmental information, contributions to agenda-setting and policy development, environmental impact assessments, and participation in environmental governance. By examining these aspects, the study seeks to understand how civil society influences environmental governance and sustainable development efforts in Bangladesh.

In light of the literature review and research questions, the general objective of this study is to investigate the depth and scope of civil society's involvement in Bangladesh's environmental movement, with particular attention to how religious organizations and public policy interact in this context.

The present study is followed qualitative analysis process and the findings are presented in descriptive information. The current study relied on secondary literatures and contemporary literature from mass media (such as newspapers, electronic media, the internet, etc.). Through this analysis this research reveals civil society involvement in the multiple and inter-connected issues connected with environmental movement in Bangladesh that complements legal analyses and qualitative environmental rights indicators.

Table 1. List of some involvement indicators

Participation in protest programs	Pressure on key stakeholders
Advocacy/Lobbying	Deepen citizen-centered environmental governance
Environmental impact assessment	Giving consent to a program
Giving opinions	Giving feedback through social network

Source: by Author (2024)

The study was considered the above actions as involvement of civil society in environmental movement in Bangladesh Therefore, this paper followed qualitative analysis process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Brief on Civil Society

Civil Society and Its Broader Role

In recent years, civil society has become a pivotal force in addressing key social, economic, and environmental challenges worldwide, including in Bangladesh. Civil society is commonly defined as a collection of voluntary groups and organizations that operate independently of the government, political, and commercial sectors, working collectively toward the common good (Alagappa, 2004, p. 4). These organizations, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), advocacy groups, and professional associations, are driven by the goal of advancing societal welfare. Civil society, therefore, serves as a critical intermediary between individuals, the market, and the state, acting to uphold norms, disseminate information, and influence public opinion and policy (Diamond, 1999, p. 221).

In Bangladesh, civil society plays an essential role in raising awareness, advocating for social justice, and promoting sustainable development (Hossain et al., 2019). The United Nations identifies civil society, including NGOs and other groups, as a crucial “third sector” between the government and business (United Nations, 2024). Through advocacy and educational efforts, civil society organizations (CSOs) shape public perspectives and encourage engagement in various issues, including environmental governance, policy formulation, and grassroots movements.

The Role of Civil Society in Policy Representation

Civil society’s role in shaping public policy is widely recognized, particularly through its “informational carrying capacity,” which helps establish public policy preferences and educates policymakers (Claibourn & Martin, 2007, p. 200). Civil society organizations (CSOs) assist policymakers by providing data on public opinions and contributing expertise on policy matters that align with their goals (Rasmussen & Reher, 2019, p. 1652). These organizations, including professional and religious groups, research institutions, environmental activists, and local NGOs, are key players in shaping Bangladesh’s environmental policies. Importantly, CSOs in Bangladesh engage with various issues such as environmental advocacy, religious values, human rights, and grassroots mobilization, contributing to the broader policy landscape.

Civil society organizations work across a range of sectors—such as advocacy groups, religious and cultural organizations, and women’s associations—engaging in spontaneous, voluntary initiatives to fulfill both individual and collective aspirations (Mureşan & Dutu, 2006, p. 17-18). While these groups may differ in ideology or focus, they share a common purpose: addressing concerns that can drive political, linguistic, and cultural change.

Environmental Movements and Civil Society in Bangladesh

The environmental movement is often considered a “new social movement,” distinct from traditional labor or civil rights movements, due to its focus on modifying societal structures to promote responsible stewardship of natural resources (Sills, 1975, p. 16). In Bangladesh, environmental concerns first gained momentum in the 1980s, influenced by global environmental activism and the growing interest of local NGOs in conservation and sustainability (Islam, 2018, p. 2). The environmental movement in Bangladesh addresses a range of social, political, and scientific challenges related to conservation, green politics, and sustainable development (Hossain et al., 2014, p. 1).

One key aspect of the environmental movement in Bangladesh is the involvement of civil society, which has played a pivotal role in raising awareness and influencing policy. CSOs, including religious organizations, advocacy groups, and grassroots initiatives, have brought

attention to issues such as deforestation, pollution, and climate change. By advocating for policy changes and mobilizing local communities, civil society has contributed to the formation of a more inclusive and environmentally conscious political framework (Sills, 1975, p. 26). In addition to advocacy, religious organizations in Bangladesh have increasingly incorporated environmental ethics and stewardship into their teachings, aligning religious principles with sustainable development efforts. This intersection of religious values and environmental activism strengthens the moral foundation of environmental policy discussions.

Religious Organizations and Environmental Advocacy

As part of Bangladesh's broader civil society landscape, religious organizations have emerged as influential advocates for environmental protection. Given that religion plays a significant role in shaping public life and policy in Bangladesh, religious institutions and leaders have started incorporating environmental stewardship into their discourses (Rahman, 2019). This development highlights the moral and ethical dimensions of environmental issues, reinforcing the importance of protecting nature as part of religious duty. Religious groups contribute to the environmental movement by raising awareness, promoting sustainable practices, and advocating for environmental justice, often in collaboration with other civil society organizations.

Civil society in Bangladesh—including religious organizations—serves as a powerful force for addressing environmental degradation and advocating for policy reform (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020). The collective efforts of civil society organizations, whether through advocacy, grassroots mobilization, or participation in environmental governance, are essential to fostering sustainable development. The increasing integration of religious values into environmental advocacy further strengthens civil society's role in shaping environmental policy. As civil society continues to evolve, its engagement in environmental movements will remain crucial to addressing the pressing environmental challenges facing Bangladesh.

Existing Environmental Policy and Regulation in Bangladesh

An organization's adherence to laws, rules, and other policy procedures pertaining to environmental issues is referred to as its environmental policy (Kraft, 2021). Pollution of the air and water, solid waste management, biodiversity, ecosystem management, biodiversity maintenance, natural resource protection, wildlife protection, and endangered species protection are some of these challenges. Bangladesh has adopted many policies for protecting environmental protection. For example, Environmental Policy 1992 and Environmental Action Plan 1992, Bangladesh Wildlife (Preservation) Order, 1973 (Amended in 1994), National Environment Management Plan 1995, Bangladesh Environmental Conservation Act (ECA) 1995, Bangladesh Environmental Conservation Rules (ECR) 1997, National Water Policy 1999, Environmental Courts Act 2000, Industrial Policy 2005, and National Environment Policy-2013 are notable.

It took the policy makers of Bangladesh fourteen amendments and 39 years to include environmental issues in the Constitution in 2011 through the fifteenth amendment. The environmental issue is placed in Part II article 18(A) (The State shall endeavor to protect and improve the environment and to preserve and safeguard the natural resources, bio-diversity, wetlands, forests and wild life for the present and future citizens. The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Printed Version October, 2011, 6) for the protection and improvement of environment and biodiversity. Currently the government of Bangladesh has a separate Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEF) (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, 2023).

Despite the presence of various environmental rules and policies, and the involvement of civil society in environmental movement, as well as collaborative activities with foreign donor

NGOs; the government has been adopting various development projects those are in conflict with environment protection. Basically those projects go against the sustainable environment promise to the world as well as the common people of the country. Such circumstances raises question; can civil society really play an effective role in environmental protection in Bangladesh? What is the actual involvement of civil society in the environmental movement? The following discussion will provide the descriptive answers to these questions. However, before that, we should briefly know the methodology for the present study.

Connection Between Civil Society, Environmental Issues, and Public Policy

Bangladesh's growing environmental civil society, home to many prominent civil society organizations (CSOs), has been integral to addressing the country's environmental challenges. The rise of CSOs in Bangladesh coincides with the country's increasing environmental degradation, driven by industrialization, globalization, and climate change. As Bangladesh has experienced substantial social and economic development since its independence, CSOs have played a crucial role in shaping policy responses to environmental issues, including those related to climate resilience, sustainable resource management, and the mitigation of development projects' environmental impacts. This study seeks to explore how Bangladesh's environmental CSOs, including religious organizations, contribute to the environmental movement and influence policy discussions from both environmental and ethical perspectives.

Environmental Impact Assessment and Public Interest Litigation

Civil society organizations are central to conducting Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA), which evaluate the environmental viability of development projects. By gathering, disseminating, and analyzing environmental information, CSOs inform the public and key stakeholders about the potential environmental impacts of such projects. Organizations like the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) have taken a leading role in advancing environmental justice through public interest litigation (PIL). BELA's efforts have expanded the "right to life" to encompass the right to a healthy environment, achieving significant legal victories such as halting deforestation, preventing hill cutting, and closing down harmful brickfields and sawmills (BELA, 2023). These successes illustrate how civil society, through legal advocacy, can directly influence public policy and ensure that environmental considerations are integrated into development projects.

Civil Society Advocacy and Environmental Justice

CSOs in Bangladesh also play a crucial role in advocating for environmental justice. Organizations like Nijera Kori and Samata work with marginalized groups, such as landless people, advocating for their rights and engaging them in sustainable practices (Koli, 2015, p. 113). Larger organizations like Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (BAPA) focus on organizing environmental protests and activities, serving as an umbrella group for various environmental movements. Multifunctional organizations such as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) balance service delivery with advocacy, promoting social forestry, secure healthcare, and access to clean drinking water (Koli, 2015, p. 113). Through these initiatives, CSOs contribute to broader policy representation by educating policymakers and citizens alike on the importance of sustainable environmental management.

Grassroots Voices and Local Engagement

Civil society is diverse and includes numerous voices, from advocacy groups to local grassroots organizations. By forming public opinions and mobilizing communities, CSOs in Bangladesh bridge the gap between local communities and policymakers, ensuring that environmental policies reflect the needs of marginalized populations (Săvoiu and Anghel, 2022, p. 218). Local organizations have made significant contributions to environmental preservation by addressing issues such as deforestation, arsenic pollution, and access to clean water and sanitation. However, CSOs often express frustration over the limited opportunities for local communities to engage in decision-making processes, reflecting a need for greater inclusion and representation at the policy level.

Enhancing Citizen-Centered Environmental Governance

Scholars highlight the importance of citizen-centered governance in supporting democratic processes and advancing environmental sustainability. Civil society organizations have facilitated public participation in environmental activities in Bangladesh, particularly through community-based environmental development projects (Islam 2017). These projects enable local communities to take an active role in decision-making and put pressure on the state to implement more accountable policies. By organizing conferences, symposiums, and public protests, CSOs have created platforms for community members to engage with policymakers and address environmental concerns. This process contributes to the development of citizen-centered environmental governance, in which local stakeholders can influence policy implementation and development.

Coordination in Policy Implementation and Global Agreements

CSOs have played a crucial role in ensuring that the Bangladeshi government fulfills its commitments under international environmental accords, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) (Sharma, 2023). These organizations work closely with local and international NGOs to facilitate the local implementation of global environmental agreements, ensuring that international obligations are met at the grassroots level. CSOs have increasingly become forums for discussing regional and global environmental issues, which has strengthened their influence over local decision-making in environmental governance.

Civil Society's Role in Environmental Policy Development

One of the most significant contributions of civil society organizations has been their influence on environmental policy development. CSOs act as watchdogs and advocates for democratic reform, often replacing the state in policy discussions regarding environmental protection (Hasan, 2015, p. 153). Over the past two decades, these organizations have played a prominent role in shaping environmental policies in Bangladesh by participating in roundtable discussions, publishing research reports, and lobbying government agencies. For example, environmental NGOs have successfully advocated for projects such as the excavation of the Kapotaksha River and the construction of barrages to address waterlogging and flood management (Uttaran, 2024). These activities demonstrate the capacity of civil society to bring environmental issues to the forefront of policy discussions and to collaborate with policymakers in crafting solutions.

Participation in Global Environmental Governance

Bangladesh's environmental civil society is also a key actor in global environmental governance, contributing to international efforts to address environmental challenges through bottom-up approaches. By engaging in community organizing, resource management, and local decision-making processes, Bangladeshi CSOs align themselves with multilateral environmental agreements and global sustainability goals. NGOs operating at both local and national levels have become essential players in executing global environmental policies, bridging the gap between international agreements and on-the-ground implementation in Bangladesh.

Challenges Facing Civil Society in the Environmental Movement

Despite the successes of civil society organizations in advocating for environmental protection, CSOs face several challenges. One of the most significant difficulties is the heavy reliance on international donor NGOs, which creates financial instability as foreign aid declines (Niyonkuru, 2016). Additionally, civil society organizations often suffer from a lack of accountability, as they are not always held responsible to the public or their local constituencies (Ikelegbe, 2013, p. 40). Political biases and limited collaboration between local, state, and national-level NGOs have also hindered the effectiveness of the environmental movement. These challenges underscore the need for stronger accountability mechanisms, better coordination, and increased financial independence for civil society organizations in Bangladesh.

The role of civil society in Bangladesh's environmental movement has been both transformative and complex. Through legal advocacy, grassroots mobilization, and participation in environmental governance, civil society organizations have shaped public policy and contributed to sustainable

environmental management. However, challenges such as political influence, financial dependency, and organizational inefficiencies continue to limit the full potential of civil society's contributions. Moving forward, enhancing the coordination between civil society, religious institutions, and policymakers will be essential to creating a more robust and effective environmental movement in Bangladesh. This integration will ensure that both ethical and practical dimensions of environmental governance are addressed, aligning with global sustainability goals and strengthening local policy implementation.

CONCLUSION

The involvement of civil society in Bangladesh's environmental movement has significant implications for both national policy and global sustainability efforts. This study concludes that civil society organizations (CSOs) play a crucial role in shaping environmental policies by gathering, disseminating, and integrating information into national and international frameworks. Actively engaged in raising environmental awareness, conducting impact assessments, and conserving vital ecosystems such as mangrove forests, CSOs have enhanced public participation in environmental governance. Their work has helped shift Bangladesh's environmental agenda toward a more inclusive and sustainable approach. In many cases, where national governments lack capacity to address resource scarcity and environmental degradation, CSOs have developed innovative solutions, such as legal advocacy, grassroots mobilization, and policy lobbying.

Organizations like BELA and BRAC have driven substantive change by integrating environmental justice into legal and policy frameworks. Religious organizations, an essential part of Bangladesh's civil society, bring ethical dimensions to the movement, offering a community-oriented approach to environmental stewardship that complements technical and policy-driven efforts. However, challenges such as financial dependency on international donors, political influences, and organizational inefficiencies continue to limit their potential. Nonetheless, collaborative efforts between CSOs, religious institutions, and policymakers have laid a foundation for more effective environmental governance. These partnerships are vital for aligning local initiatives with global agreements such as the UNFCCC and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), ensuring that international commitments are met through localized action. Ultimately, civil society's continued engagement in environmental governance, integrating religious values, technical expertise, and public mobilization, will be crucial for advancing sustainable policies in Bangladesh and contributing to green politics at both national and international levels.

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