

Questioning the Helping Hand: A Literature Review on Politics in Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs)

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Abstract

This literature review examines the multifaceted roles of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in bridging gaps left by state and market failures, particularly in sectors such as education, health, and environmental conservation. The literature review traces the historical context of NGOs post-World War II, highlighting their evolution from local initiatives to major players on the global stage, as detailed by scholars like Reimann (2006) and Brass et al. (2018). It also explores strategic proliferation and operational challenges faced by NGOs across different political and economic contexts. It discusses the dual role of NGOs as both service providers and policy influencers, acknowledging their significant contributions to community development and global governance. However, it highlights the contentious issues of accountability and legitimacy, suggesting that while NGOs are indispensable agents of change, their effectiveness is often marred by issues of donor dependency and insufficient grassroots engagement. The literature review identifies critical gaps in current research, particularly the need for more comparative studies that consider the impact of technological advancements and shifts in governance on NGO effectiveness, and thereby calls for future research to explore more sustainable and inclusive operational models that reduce dependency and enhance the long-term impact of NGOs in community development.

Questioning the Helping Hand: A Literature Review on Politics in NGOs

Filling the voids of failures on the part of the state and the market, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have increasingly taken up pivotal roles in global governance and community development. Since they operate across the sectors of education, health, environmental conservation, and human rights, NGOs have greatly affected policy agendas,

service delivery, and empowerment at the community level worldwide. Their position is widely appreciated in an expanding spectrum of pursuits, from poverty reduction to economic and environmental development to climate change mitigation. The literature review that follows, therefore, dissects the diversity of roles these NGOs play, navigating through the different contributions, challenges, and mechanisms of accountability in the broader ecosystem of global governance and community development. This paper thus seeks to pick apart the dynamics of NGO operations, their relationships with government donors, and their impacts on communities. This literature review provides a thorough analysis of the existing scholarly work on NGOs, pinpointing the knowledge gaps and suggesting future research directions. It is structured comprehensively, covering all facets of NGO dynamics including their evolution, roles, challenges, accountability measures, and future perspectives. This approach ensures a holistic understanding, encapsulating the complex nature of NGOs and their impact on global and community scales. The literature review seeks to offer a robust framework that informs both current practices and strategic planning in the NGO sector.

The Evolution and Global Proliferation of NGOs

Irwin (2015) notes that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have changed a lot since they first started in the 19th century. Today, they are a key part of our world, helping to shape both local communities and global policies. Historically, NGOs found ways to work on issues that crossed borders, collaborating with governments but also sometimes challenging them. This complex relationship has helped NGOs grow and become important players on the global stage. They are known for stepping in where governments might not, adapting to new challenges, and

making a real difference in both local and global issues. Thus, this literature review forms part of these aspects, building on the foundational works of Reimann (2006), Aldashev and Navarra (2018), Brass et al. (2018), and Allan and Hadden (2017), all of whom, detail a very comprehensive understanding of the evolution and impacts of NGOs across the globe.

Understanding the roles and capabilities of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) today requires a look back at their historical roots. Reimann (2006) locates the origin of these NGOs post-World War II era. The period saw these organizations spring up as a result of the gap created by the war as well as the decolonization process. NGOs started as small entities, mostly localized in nature, and tended to provide humanitarian aid or development projects. Afterward, however, their roles also diversified into advocacy and policy influence on the global level. Aldashev and Navarra (2018) explain further this finding by noting that in this effort, NGOs have diversified their activities, and as a result, tend to be much more professional. These historical insights impress on the flexibility of NGOs' work and their increasing importance in solving international challenges beyond any single nation's capabilities.

Brass et al. (2018) agreed that these propelling forces are collectively working towards the exponential growth and influence by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) around the world. Of these, in general, liberalization of the international markets and technological change. This further underscores the popularity of NGOs as state mechanisms were inefficient in the solution of the diverse nature of social and environmental problems. With the coming of the invention of the internet, free movement of information was facilitated. It encouraged certain sorts of global connectedness that were otherwise inconceivable, letting NGOs work and

coordinate on a canvas unimagined. Their invaluable expertise in soliciting resources, gathering information, and cross-border coordination has turned NGOs into integral players in the field of international relations. These further affect the shaping of policies and change in attitudes, hence their indispensable role as critical change agents in global issues that are affected by the policies. The very rare positioning indeed underscores the power with which it reinstalls NGOs within the complex web of global governance and involvement of civil society.

Allan and Hadden (2017) have analyzed strategic framing employed by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) with the view to understanding subtler ways it is used to determine outlines of global politics with the power. On the other hand, it could be that such organizations craft exemplary narratives that, with their specialized expertise, perceived moral high ground, and vast international networks, can mobilize support, guide policies, and even catalyze societal changes. The ability to frame this comes into play prominently in environmental politics: NGOs were crucial in raising awareness of the need for decisiveness concerning climate change. While the importance of these is duly recognized, the ascendancy of NGOs brings a suite of contentious issues. The criticism goes to the legitimacy and accountability in the areas in which they feel they are representing the people they purport to represent. The status itself bears witness to the very complexity of the influence of the NGOs, though they are very influential; equally well-described as one of the most polarizing actors within the ongoing discourse surrounding global governance and policy-making. This dual role is essential, though often contentious, to the very heart of NGOs in the delicate dance of international politics and environmental concern.

As related to the significant narration of the appearance of NGO development, this literature review will bring out the critical times of their appearance, the triggers towards their enormous increase, and the influence they produce over the fabric of world politics. The paper offers a multi-perspectival view that would honor the significant strides of the NGOs but keep sight of the severe obstacles remaining through consulting various sources. Reimann (2006) and Aldashev & Navarra (2018) trace the historical journey of NGOs, which has evolved from relatively modest beginnings to superlative giants, an evolution that mirrors their tenacity and flexibility. The accounts force one to consider what these processes mean regarding the kind of grassroots connections that are always in danger of being lost through growing professionalization. This seems to signal an external dynamic of what fuels the proliferation of NGOs, from technological changes to global market forces, pointing toward a robust framework to understand such expansion but hinting at the gaps possible for addressing the nuanced impacts of this growth at the local scale. Allan and Hadden (2017) test NGOs' strategic capacity to navigate global politics and demonstrate their ability to effect changes in policy discourse. However, this power is counterbalanced by continuous debates about the legitimacy and transparency of the agendas, two critical areas for augmentation within the sector. These studies summarize the successes of NGO operations at the forefront of political reforms and development scaling but at the higher ground, equally showing key areas that need to be improved appropriately, especially in ensuring accountability and, most importantly, active grassroots participation in scaling up the world.

The Roles and Contributions of NGOs in Community Development

Green & Haines (2015) define community development programs as planned efforts to build various forms of capital within communities to improve the overall quality of life for residents. These programs often focus on enhancing physical, human, social, financial, environmental, political, and cultural capital. Community development programs have become vital in facilitating socio-economic development, improvement of educational conditions, healthcare services, and access to agricultural sustainability. This review of literature has examined multifaceted contributions by the NGOs towards community development and leans on the contributions of Hashim et al. (2020), Irwin (2015), and Elbers (2017). These studies point to significant outreach and successes in the NGO world but also brings out complexities and challenges that are part and parcel of this world, giving an already multi-layered view into this complex field via contemporary research.

Indeed, non-governmental organizations have played very critical roles in the development of communities around the world. This point is well captured by Hashim et al. (2020) when they bring out the impact of NGOs in Zamfara State, Nigeria, whereby they show how localized initiatives lead to a sharp improvement in livelihoods under community-managed projects. It is a clear indication of the power vested in the NGOs by the state government in mobilizing resources, promoting community participation, and carrying out development activities that are sustainable for the beneficiaries. Irwin (2015) supports the foregoing by emphasizing that the work of NGOs in social and economic development has come to the worldwide spotlight. Many have noted their role in bringing togetherness to fill the gap that has been left by governments and market failures. However, the above contributed greatly, and it is evident from the literature that there is an underdeveloped understanding in terms of the long-

term sustainability of such initiatives implemented at the ground level, while the need for much more robust mechanisms to measure and assure that the socio-economic interventions by NGOs have enduring impacts.

Hashim et al. (2020) detail the vital contributions of NGOs in education, healthcare, and agriculture, highlighting specific projects that significantly enhance educational outcomes, healthcare delivery, and agricultural productivity. These initiatives address immediate needs while fostering long-term development and empowerment. However, there is a call for a more thorough analysis of scaling these successes across diverse cultural contexts. The ongoing debate centers on finding the right balance between NGOs as service providers and as advocates for systemic change in these key sectors, emphasizing their dual roles in immediate service delivery and sustained advocacy for structural reforms. Similarly, Elbers (2017) explores the significant role of NGOs in promoting self-help and sustainable development, emphasizing strategies that enable communities to lead their development efforts with high autonomy and resilience. This approach prioritizes long-term sustainability and moves away from traditional dependency models. However, the discourse also highlights potential challenges, such as the risk of excluding communities with socio-economic barriers that hinder participation in self-help initiatives.

Challenges and Contentions Facing NGOs

With the incision of its positive impact, NGOs are the bedrock in addressing all the global challenges, though facing the legal, operational, and financial barriers put in place. This section of this literature review discusses the complexities around the challenges from the

seminal work of Watson and Burles (2018), Crack (2018), Lu (2016), Suárez & Gugerty (2016), and Bromley et al. (2020) to synthesize and give an overview of the barriers NGOs face in light of assessing and bringing forth strengths and weaknesses of these studies, with an eye toward research gaps.

NGOs face a constellation of challenges that profoundly affect their operational and strategic frameworks. A pivotal issue is the securitization of NGO funding, particularly from foreign sources, which leads to increased governmental scrutiny and restrictive measures, limiting their effectiveness and compromising their autonomy (Watson & Burles, 2018). Furthermore, the varied accountability expectations across different types of NGOs, such as humanitarian versus advocacy organizations, create internal conflicts within broad regulatory initiatives like the INGO Accountability Charter, complicating compliance and recognition among stakeholders (Crack, 2017). These challenges are exacerbated by low awareness and recognition of such frameworks among donors and the NGO community, making it difficult for NGOs to leverage compliance into enhanced credibility or support (Crack, 2017; Watson & Burles, 2018). Together, these factors indicate a complex operational landscape that NGOs must navigate, balancing regulatory pressures and diverse expectations of accountability while maintaining their mission integrity and independence.

Watson and Burles (2018), and Crack (2018) look at some of these legal and operational challenges that NGOs face, noting how they can greatly hinder the work of NGOs to improve their operations. As Watson and Burles (2018) observe, most countries have harsh policies, imposing a range of restrictions on NGO activities for national security or political stability.

Crack (2018) adds to this argument, saying that the other challenges include registration and reporting requirements, in addition to operational space. However, the literature has failed to provide a broader understanding of how NGOs deal with the existing challenges across different political and legal contexts. Future studies in this line of research could adopt an even more international perspective as well as assess the extent to which the universality of such challenges exists and strategies that are proven to be effective may emerge from diverse settings.

Lu et al., (2016) adopt a critical tone on the financial sustainability of NGOs working with more limitations towards their relationships with the government and donor funding. From their findings, Lu et al., (2016) noted that NGOs worked in such a way that their financial dependence influenced change in the agendas, thereby compromising their independence through a strategic choice to select what to prioritize between donor interests and those of the community. Suárez and Gugerty (2016) evaluate how the inability to reach a sufficient level of financial resources affects the operational capability and sustainability of a long-term NGO. Moreover, these scholars further clarify the financial dependency state of NGOs. They are, however, mostly confined to the symptoms of financial dependence, but do not concentrate on the reasons for financial dependence. There is very little exploration of alternative, sustainable models of funding for strengthening the financial independence of NGOs. Future studies would explore more innovative financing mechanisms that could mitigate these challenges and ensure that NGOs continue to be run independently of government operations in the pursuit of their objectives.

Bromley et al. (2020) maintain that laws dealing with legal restrictions regarding foreign funding to NGOs over the last years are becoming quite common and resetting the operational landscape of many NGOs. The paper makes implications of these restrictions on the impacts on the ability of NGOs to raise necessary resources and to sustain the activity. While Bromley et al. (2020) go some way to synthesizing the legal challenges, regrettably, it bears somewhat of a narrow remit evaluating the socio-political context more generally to drive the legislative change.

NGO Accountability and Transparency

AbouAssi and Trent (2016) adopt the accountability theory to elaborate on how NGOs perceive and practice accountability within their operations, including upward accountability to donors and downward accountability to beneficiaries. What their analysis portrays is a thick context, where accountability is not driven by compliance but is tangled in ethical responsibilities and organizational mission. Following this study, Van Zyl and Claeys (2019) question what impels an NGO to take up accountability practices. Will it generally be an internal or external motivation? Will this motivation most likely prompt a strengthened accountability mechanism or not? Both studies provide strong qualitative data to understand the multifaceted ways of how this necessarily plays out in terms of NGO accountability; however, they focus much more on specific regional contexts that may not translate as a general rule and, by that, hint at a gap in the universality of global applicability of their findings.

1. Government Funding and NGO Depoliticization:

Bloodgood and Tremblay-Boire (2017) therefore approach the question of how government funding changes NGOs and locate the process of depoliticization as one of their key answers. They argue that support to NGOs from these institutions can lead them to compromise on the level of advocacy and work more in the interest of the benefactor thereby compromising their autonomy and strength of advocacy. This reflects the careful balance NGOs have to strike between securing needed funding and saving their independent voices. Based on quantitative data from Bloodgood and Tremblay-Boire (2017) as shown in the image below, their study shows that some of the finer qualitative changes in the missions and strategies of NGOs that result from government funding may be missed. However, this draws attention to the need for more qualitative inquiry concerning what potential impacts of government support on NGO integrity may be—in nuanced shifts in organizational prioritization, advocacy approaches, mission alignment, and the like. Future research should build upon this platform by using qualitative methods to explore the subtle ways through which government funding influences NGOs' operating ethos and advocacy patterns. Then, it follows that future research should elaborate upon this by using qualitative means to explore the subtle ways through which government funding influences both NGOs' operating ethos and their advocacy patterns, in that way putting together a rounded picture of the delicate interplay between financial support and organizational independence.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variables	N	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
Lobbying expenditure	1105	63,751	0	1,000,000
Public financing	1105	2,048,639	0	6.44e + 08
National financing	1105	956,997	0	4.26e + 08
European financing	1105	316,650	0	1.20e + 08
NGO budget	1105	6,260,685	0	8.07e + 08
NGO regulatory index	934	1.85	0	5.5
Number of countries of operation	1105	9	0	50
Humanitarian aid	1105	0.25	0	1
Foreign affairs	1105	0.18	0	1
Energy	1105	0.26	0	1
Equal opportunity	1105	0.32	0	1

NGO = non-governmental organization.

‘Bloodgood, E., & Tremblay-Boire, J. (2017). Descriptive statistics [table]. *European Political Science Review*, 9(3), 401-424. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1755773915000430>

2. Measures and Indices for Improving NGO Transparency:

The index of disclosure is very influential in improving transparency in NGOs, as it tries to build and validate the activities and projects of NGOs, proposing a real mechanism for NGOs to strengthen transparency towards stakeholders and operational legitimacy. This innovation was a leap in dealing with a structured framework for transparency, enabling greater accountability and the challenge of building trust on financing, highlighting the necessity for research that is more qualitative and nuanced (Cabedo et al., 2018). However, it is a step in the right direction. The study establishes a way short of exploring practical challenges whereby the NGOs can resist the new method due to the lack of resources or strategic approaches that can make them keep their uniqueness. The nuances of how to implement such an index across the diverse landscape of NGOs, much less in an ever-heterogeneous sea of smaller or larger ones that vary sharply in scope, size, and sector, would be enough. This would then have future research to pick apart the obstacles to the adoption of such measures and contribute to identifying not only but also

suggesting tailor-made transparency strategies that take into account the varied capacities and objectives of NGOs for their broader applicability and effectiveness of these initiatives.

This literature review on NGO accountability and transparency, although foundational, moves through with a mix of strengths and weaknesses across various studies. AbouAssi and Trent (2016) exhaustively consider the multifaceted nature of accountability mechanisms and the manifold pressures confronting NGOs. The downside is that the regional specificity of their insights means they can have a little broader general application. Bloodgood and Tremblay-Boire (2017) add substantively to the debate by offering quantitative substantiation that the risks of depoliticization of government funding portends are likely to influence the advocacy of NGOs. However, its focus on statistical data could hardly account for the strategic shifts NGOs go through in response to the pressures they face on financing and highlights the necessity for research that is more qualitative and nuanced. Cabedo et al. (2018) designed a new index for transparency, which would give NGOs a very concrete tool to further their transparency. The research does not cover at all the practicalities of its actual implementation, especially in smaller NGOs; therefore, there is a rather big research gap that would need to be tackled in relation to understanding the real problems NGOs face when trying to become more transparent in practice. Taken together, these studies offer invaluable insights but at the same time point to key critical areas for further research, especially concerning global generalization and how transparency measures are practiced in their implementation.

NGO-Government Relationships and the Impact on Civil Society

a) Collaborative vs. Contentious Relationships

Lu (2018) and Sakue-Collins (2021) both examine the continuum of NGO-government relationships, with one further, Lu submits that the combined relationships between NGOs and governments could greatly increase service delivery and policy advocacy, thus implying that both, when combined could lead to great social change. Sakue-Collins, on the other hand, discusses areas of friction between the NGO mission and government policies, centering on how difficult it is for NGOs to guard their advocacy function without departing from principles. That is, this dichotomy demonstrates the very fragile equilibrium in which NGOs have to work: they have to work either with government bodies or, on the contrary, even compete against them. Those analyses have theoretically soundly provided the theoretical foundation to explain theoretical underpinnings for NGO-government interactions; however, they do not show a critical literature gap. They point directly at the need for further empirical research on these dynamics with real-life examples. This gap does indicate a place where a lot of research is needed in firming up the theoretical models in the experiences to understand the practical part of how NGOs can balance between cooperating with the bodies of the government in a way that brings effectiveness—finding the fine line between cooperation and independence and advocacy in bringing about change.

b) Government Support and NGO Effectiveness

Boomsma and O'Dwyer (2019) and Fiador (2013) critically scrutinize the effect of government support on the effectiveness of NGOs, where the supporting variable sometimes becomes a bane as much as it happens to be a boon in a complex landscape. In this respect, their research pointed out that financial and regulatory support from the government to NGOs in

increasing their operational capabilities and increasing the impact they generate appears, at the same time, to bring the risk of independence loss and deviation from their main missions. This critical analysis reveals the extremely dangerous tightrope that NGOs would have to walk between accepting government support and compromising the very core of their mission. Generalizing their findings across the NGO spectrum, therefore, necessarily concedes the heterogeneity—which is part and parcel of the sector—among them, differences of size, operational scope, and geographic presence, though not necessarily displayed in terms of value and mission mandate. This underscores an urgent dire need for more definite research, which, considering the different sorts of NGOs, aims to establish the particular circumstances under which government support will either be helpful or not very efficient. These focused questions would help in foregrounding how NGOs can manage to navigate the risky terrain of state assistance without losing either their independence or their mission.

Musila (2019) undertakes an adroit selection of case studies into the complex interrogation of NGO-government relations, which exposes on-the-ground operational challenges facing NGOs and the strategic adjustments the former make while being buffeted by governmental pressures. This is a very detailed analysis that provides valuable insight into the material effects produced by the dynamics of NGO-government relations, hence concatenating quite effectively the abstract theoretical framework to the practical realm. However, if that is true, then the work by Musila mostly adds to an in-depth understanding of those complex interactions; the very few case studies that he presents as an example may beggar belief in the exhaustiveness of the analysis. Such a focus may not possibly capture the wide spectrum of NGO-government relations and their variations in different geopolitical landscapes, cultural

contexts, and sectors. This points to the kind of area that needs to see further and fuller case study collections that represent the very diversity characterizing NGO-government engagements. An enriched dataset of such findings would more deeply allow an understanding of the dynamics around these and provide a much more nuanced view of how this plays out in different settings for different NGOs. This would, therefore, improve in general the generalizability and application of research in this field.

The Role of NGOs in a Changing Global Order

Sakue-Collins (2021) wonders whether NGOs play a critical role in changing the increased dynamics of a global order that, increasingly, is coming to take the character of rising geopolitical tensions, alarming environmental crises, and widening social inequalities. The study underscores the necessity for NGOs to adapt their strategies and operations to remain relevant and impactful. An example of this is the call upon NGOs, who must innovate with their approaches towards new challenges of advocacy, service delivery, and engagement of both government and non-government, amidst changing traditional power structures. The new environment will demand that NGOs think strategically about how they may deploy their unique position to foster partnership and collaboration, policy change, mobilization of resources across borders, and be at the cutting edge of addressing global problems.

Berlan & Bruno-van Vijfeijken (2013) explains how the phenomenon of new organizational forms in the NGO sector interfaces with the planned closure of NGOs. This innovation brings into light the traditionalist mindset of perpetuity, bringing out the argument that indeed, a strategic reflection of an NGO's life cycle and under which conditions it can move

towards planned closure to maximize the impact and sustainability. The above discussion leads to mission fulfillment, importance, and the role of resource responsibility in transferring successful interventions as the three main keys in the decision-making process for a planned closure. This paradigm shift evokes an even broader debate on how the NGOs can be assured of interventions that are sustainable and impactful such that they thrive even in the case of their absence, therefore leading to more innovative thinking in organizational strategy for the development and humanitarian field.

Proposals for Enhancing NGO Accountability and Effectiveness

Carolei (2022) offers a comprehensive analysis of proposals aimed at enhancing NGO accountability and effectiveness. This is as much about the growing scrutiny of the transparency and impact of NGOs as it is about the mechanisms that could ensure that these organizations are held accountable to their stakeholders. The strategy contains multidimensional approaches that have to include both internal governance reforms and outside-in regulatory measures if a culture has to be inculcated in the NGO sector, which should be characterized by transparent operations, ethical conduct, and impacted operations.

The future for NGOs is connected with their ability to adapt in a world where building a responsive organizational strategy and staying within the strict boundaries of accountability and effectiveness is no longer something that can be optional. In any case, debate on both issues will continue, and the NGO sector will stand at an important crossroads filled with challenges but also great opportunities. It simply means that they will have navigated the terrains effectively if they were to be flexible and open to ideas and practices that would enhance the role of being the

catalyst for social change, the role of stewards of resources, and the role of champions of accountability in society. The findings by Sakue-Collins, Berlan, Bruno-van Vijfeijken, and Carolei provide quite enlightening direction into the paths through which these objectives could be realized, making a stepping-stone towards the future of a more impactful, accountable, and dynamic NGO sector.

NGOs Criticism

This section of the literature review draws largely on the works of Petras (1999), Choudry (2012) and Lewis (2005).

1) The Paradox of Aid and Dependency

Indeed, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have been hailed for their good work in bringing life and much-needed assistance to communities that would otherwise be most possibly forgotten by national and international development efforts. However, a closer look suggests a different story, more often than not mired in the paradox of aid and dependency. In many instances, these interventions turn out to be nurturing a syndrome of dependency by the beneficiary communities even as NGOs continue to offer these services and the much-needed support. More often than not, this has been the case whereby local populations tend to depend on outside help, aid, or assistance too much for their survival and development, rather than developing their initiatives and being self-reliant. NGOs instead of addressing and solving the roots of the problem, constantly provide temporary solutions. Critics, on the other hand, argue that this kind of dependency undermines from very root levels of empowerment and sustainable

development, which NGOs are supposed to promote. This is, however, the challenge—the question of striking the balance between support and autonomy. For NGOs, they are seen as the key players in efforts of international development. However, the “aid industry” notion suggests that some of the NGOs can operate more as businesses that are seeking profits and self-preservation rather than as altruistic entities that are genuinely doing humanitarian work. This questions the notion of “doing good” and providing a helping hand nature of NGOs and underlines the dire need for thorough critical assessment by the NGOs of their strategies so that their interventions are designed to build capacities and not create dependence for perpetuity. In the work of Choudhry (2012), NGOs are seen operating in a neoliberal structure and are used by International companies and communities particularly in developing countries as a means of information on good land for privatization, mono-cropping, and economic opportunities in exchange for funding. The myth of development is sold to the community by the NGOs in a project that has been predetermined by the same NGOs. The cost of the “Good” done by the NGOs is greater than the “Good” in itself. On the other side, the broader discourse on aid effectiveness and dependency also demanded that aid dynamics be taken as complex and the need for empowering forms of assistance are required, as opposed to disabling forms.

2) The Neutrality and Politics of NGOs

Many debates arise concerning the political neutrality of the NGOs, with critics holding the argument that, by all means, their operations are political. This calls into question the very nature of these claims to neutrality for those NGOs that engage and challenge existing power relations in their advocacy and development work. The engagement in this act is not only an act

of giving but also a political act of speaking out and advocating for policy changes, human rights, development, and environmental preservation, among other issues. Critics assert that sources of funding for NGOs, be it from governments, private donors, or international institutions, may influence their agenda and priorities, putting their role under potentially conflicting interests, as the donors have both policy and financial control over the NGOs to run their propaganda. As Lewis (2005) notes, NGOs are seen as a kind of *tabula rasa*, a 'blank slate', onto which a range of current ideas, expectations, and anxieties about development are now projected. That places a complex interplay between their philanthropic missions and the political environments within which they operate. This requires even more transparency and reflexivity on the part of NGOs concerning their political locations and the impacts of the work they do on the socio-political landscapes of communities with which they are supposed to engage. In so doing, therefore, it guides NGOs for the adoption of ethical and effective practices, at the same time negotiating their political dimensions that respect the autonomy of the beneficiary communities in question and their agency.

3) The Accountability and Legitimacy of NGOs

This brings quite a challenge to NGOs on aspects of legitimacy and accountability, more so in the representation and service of their target populations. NGOs do not work with the same democratic oversight as public institutions but in an area of public trust and non-elected status. Critics say that this would, in effect, open up space where NGOs may act with impunity, not in direct accountability to the needs and desires of the communities where the organizations purport to assist. Added to this, the legitimacy of an NGO is questioned when it is seen to impose

solutions from outside without due consultation or involving local stakeholders sufficiently and this is because of the lobbying process for funds in which the proposal has to include a predetermined project in which the fund requested is for. In this case, NGOs engage in persuading the community about the project rather than participatory involvement in the project decisions. This calls for a more participatory approach to the operations of the NGOs, and the beneficiary communities are active players in the decision processes so that the interventions are based on the actual realities and priorities of those sought to be assisted. It will go a long way in making the activities of these NGOs much closer to the real needs of those they purport to serve by strengthening the accountability mechanisms so that transparency through their work, solicitation of constant feedback, and community-based evaluations will be a strong reality.

4) The Economic Impact of NGOs on Local Economies

Another area of critique concerns the economic impact of NGOs on local economies. However, all said and done, while these NGOs do play a very important role in providing support in times of crisis, their presence and operations can have very deleterious effects on the local markets and economies. For example, the overflow of foreign aid or goods in the country might defeat the country's local producers and businesses in the market, thus setting distortions in the market and economic dependency. Choudry (2012) said NGOs are neoliberalism in structure and are tools in the hands of transnational companies to serve their interest in exchange for funds. During crisis or war, NGOs are used to penetrate the country's economy thereby

increasing the consumption and reliance on exported goods and services. The voluntary services approach of NGOs in recruitment might also take away skilled labor from local sectors, thus aggravating the status of brain drain and weakening public systems such as healthcare and education. That said, an integrated approach would be necessary, meaning they would work in close partnership with local businesses, governmental organizations, and community groups to make sure their interventions do not run in competition but rather in support of the local economic landscape. This is local in-procurement investment and capacity development for the local enterprises through which NGOs can play their part in realizing sustainable economic growth and resilience to ensure that their interventions promote long-term prosperity and self-reliance rather than dependency.

Findings from the Literature

The review of the literature, in this paper, on Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) provides a broad overview of their evolution, roles, contributions, challenges, and accountability mechanisms. Several key findings emerge from this review, which are critical in understanding the current landscape and future directions of NGO research and practice:

1. Evolution and Adaptation:

NGOs have undergone significant transformations from their inception in the post-World War II era to become crucial actors in global governance and community development. The

literature highlights the shift from local, humanitarian-focused entities to globally recognized organizations that actively shape policy and advocacy across borders. This evolution reflects NGOs' ability to adapt to the changing geopolitical and socio-economic conditions, leveraging technological advancements and the liberalization of international markets.

2. Diverse Roles and Impactful Contributions:

The roles of NGOs have expanded beyond service delivery to include advocacy, policy influence, and direct involvement in socio-economic development. Studies highlight their success in fostering community development through initiatives that enhance various forms of capital, such as educational, health, and agricultural outcomes. However, these contributions vary significantly across different cultural and operational contexts, indicating a need for tailored approaches to community development that consider local needs and capacities.

3. Operational Challenges and Strategic Contentions:

NGOs face a range of operational challenges, including legal restrictions, financial dependencies, and accountability demands from diverse stakeholders. The literature underscores the complexity of navigating these challenges, which are exacerbated by the varying legal and political environments in which NGOs operate. The strategic decisions NGOs make in response to these challenges are pivotal, often influencing their long-term sustainability and effectiveness.

4. Accountability and Transparency:

Increasing demands for transparency and accountability have led NGOs to adopt new practices and mechanisms, such as the index of disclosure, aimed at enhancing legitimacy and stakeholder trust. However, the implementation of these mechanisms faces considerable hurdles, particularly in adapting them across the diverse NGO sector. The literature points to a gap in understanding the practical challenges associated with these accountability measures, especially in smaller or resource-constrained NGOs.

5. Gaps and Future Research Directions:

The current scholarship on NGO-government interactions identifies a critical gap in comparative analyses that span diverse geographical regions and operational sectors. This gap highlights the need for a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of these relationships. Addressing this, future research should aim to incorporate a broader range of diversification and apply mixed methods. This approach should blend the quantitative evaluation of NGO effectiveness across various domains with the nuanced insights provided by qualitative case studies from around the globe. Such an integrated approach would enhance our understanding of the delicate balance between NGOs and governments, shedding light on the various strategies NGOs employ to navigate challenging environments.

Moreover, there is a pressing need for extensive studies that explore the evolution of NGO-government relationships over time. By tracking these dynamics through extended periods, researchers can gain critical insights into how these interactions adapt and change in response to shifting political climates, evolving funding models, and policy transformations. This type of research is indispensable for providing actionable guidance to both NGOs and governments. It

aims to cultivate more effective collaborations that maximize social impact and bolster the health and vibrancy of civil societies worldwide. By bridging these identified research gaps, forthcoming studies can deliver practical strategies that enable NGOs and governments to manage their relationships more effectively, ultimately benefiting the global community at large.

Discussion

This discussion seeks to deepen the understanding of the roles and complexities faced by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) within the context of global governance and community development, as highlighted by the comprehensive literature review. It builds on the findings to explore the implications of these roles and challenges more thoroughly, offering a richer interpretation and proposing directions for future research and practice.

The evolution of NGOs from local service providers to key actors in global policy advocacy is notable for its breadth and depth. This transition reflects a strategic adaptation to the changing needs of the international community and the increasing complexity of global challenges such as climate change, health crises, and socio-economic disparities. As NGOs have evolved, so too have their strategies, moving from direct aid delivery to engaging in policy dialogues and crafting advocacy campaigns that influence international and local policies (Van Til, 2013; Mitlin and Satterthwaite, 2013). This strategic shift demands a new understanding of the capabilities and resources NGOs must possess to effectively navigate the global policy environment.

NGOs play diverse roles across various domains, significantly impacting the communities they serve. Their contributions to community development are evident in their

efforts to enhance education, health, and agricultural systems. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives varies greatly depending on the cultural, economic, and political contexts in which they operate. This variability highlights the necessity for context-specific strategies that are informed by thorough local needs assessments and continuous stakeholder engagement to ensure that the interventions are both culturally appropriate and sustainable (Salamon, 1999).

The operational challenges faced by NGOs, such as navigating legal restrictions and managing financial dependencies, are significant. These challenges are further complicated by the varying accountability standards required by different stakeholders, including donors, governments, and the communities they serve. The strategic decisions made in response to these challenges significantly impact the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of NGOs. The literature points to a critical need for developing robust strategies that can withstand political and economic fluctuations and maintain operational integrity without compromising the mission (Watson and Burles, 2018; Bromley et al., 2020).

Increased demands for accountability and transparency have led NGOs to adopt new practices such as the development of disclosure indices. However, the implementation of these practices often faces significant hurdles, particularly in smaller or less-resourced NGOs. There is a crucial need for developing practical, scalable solutions that can be adapted across the diverse spectrum of NGOs to enhance transparency and accountability effectively. Future research should explore innovative accountability mechanisms that are both effective and adaptable to different organizational sizes and capabilities (AbouAssi and Trent, 2016; Van Zyl & Claeyé, 2019).

The gaps identified in the current literature, particularly the lack of in-depth comparative analyses across different geopolitical and operational contexts, suggest several future research directions. There is a pressing need for studies that use mixed methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how NGOs manage their dual roles of service delivery and advocacy within varying political and economic climates. Such studies would offer invaluable insights into the strategic adaptations necessary for NGOs to remain effective in their missions. Additionally, longitudinal research that tracks the evolution of NGO-government relationships over time could provide critical data to guide effective collaboration strategies that optimize both service delivery and advocacy efforts (Crack, 2017; Lu et al., 2016).

Conclusion

The comprehensive literature review sets its pace across the multifaceted landscape of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) with a special lens on the history, the major roles of community development, and the critical issues associated with it. This rich blend of scholarly works points to a critical need for further empirical research, which will bridge the theoretical models with real-world practice and come up with comparative studies that will enlighten the variance of NGO operation and funding in the world, affecting organizational strategy. The future of NGOs, brightened up by thought leaders like Sakue-Collins, Berlan & Bruno-van Vijfeijken, and Carolei, no doubt would have to hinge on how adaptable they will be within a fast-changing global order, how much an introspective character they develop toward their life cycles, and how steadfast the commitment to the culture of accountability and effectiveness remains. As NGOs increasingly stand at the crossroads of opportunity and challenge, much may

need to be heard from the scholarly community if these institutions are to prosper in their indispensable role as agents of social change and stewards of sustainability and be the beacons of hope amidst the world's greatest challenges.

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