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Civil Society's Response to Covid–19-Affected Migrants: The Case of Bangladesh

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Abstract

This article explores civil society's response to the plight of international migrant workers during the pandemic. Taking Bangladesh as a case, it depicts civil society's engagement with migrants' issues and analyses factors that shaped their relations with the state and other actors. As demonstrated in the article, despite their fast and first response through service delivery and awareness campaigns, civil society's role was greatly affected by resource constraints and the state's dominance. The civil society, however, found its success in influencing the state to mobilise its resources for Covid-impacted migrants. Governed by values such as autonomy, solidarity and partnership, civil society activities in this case resemble supplementary and adversarial models of state–civil society relations. The findings offer useful insights into the construction of 'civil society' in a South Asian setting, and its ability to support vulnerable communities during a crisis.

Introduction

The Covid–19 pandemic struck the world in 2020, disrupting the lives, livings and well-being of millions of people. Taking Bangladesh as a case, this article examines the role of civil society in mitigating the quandaries faced by international labour migrants and their families. While 'civil society' (CS) is a well-researched field of inquiry, the pandemic has become a prism to look into CS's role and responses to the devastating social impacts of the crisis. The Nonprofit Policy Forum (NPF) published a full volume articulating CS responses and state-civil society organisations'(CSOs) relations during the pandemic in various country contexts (NPF 2021). The cases demonstrate the resilience and flexibility

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of CSOs, their efforts to support the vulnerable during the emergency and lockdown, as well as the issues of CSO networking with the state (Meyer et al. 2021; Kövér et al. 2021; Harris 2021). As the volume makes explicit, partnerships for service delivery between CSOs and governments clearly yielded many positive results in the countries of the North.

The Southern countries, by contrast, experienced mixed success as they sought to use the potential of CS to mitigate the consequences of the pandemic. In Japan and Hong Kong, CS had a greater role in initiating effective controls (Lewis and Mayer 2020), whereas China's Party-state controlled CSO activities (Sidel and Hu 2021). In Turkey, CSOs used online activities to support people before state activities began, though they had to be cautious in dealing with the state as well as with politically polarised elements within society (Dogan and Genc 2021). A different response model was observed in South Korea, where the government coordinated multiple governance and public policy development actors (Jeong and Kim 2021). In the milieu of unprotected and destitute internal migration crisis during the pandemic, India experienced a strained government–CSO relationship as the former failed to recognise the importance of the latter (Tandon and Aravind 2021); nonetheless, CSOs provided victims with information and material support (Wagh 2021). In Brazil, a vast network of 780,000 CSO organisations' responses to the pandemic was conditioned by the regulation, managerial, financial and political climate (Alves and Costa 2020). A general lack of solidarity, cohesion and partnership was evident in most Southern cases, as the state often presented itself as the 'sole protector' and exerted control over other actors, including CSOs.

In line with the above literature, this article intends to explore the extent to which Bangladesh has been able to seize the potential of CS to reduce the consequences of the calamity. In doing so, it has chosen to focus on the country's labour migration sector, asking: What initiatives form the CS's response to migrants affected by the Covid–19 pandemic? Were there divergences and convergences of interest and ideas among CSOs and other actors? To what extent did autonomy, solidarity and partnership play out as values? Would the emergency responses and relations outlive the crisis? The aim is to get a holistic view of CS involvement in ameliorating the condition of pandemic-affected migrants and returnees. Crucially, the article illustrates the construction of the concept of civil society in its relations to the state and marginalised communities such as migrant workers in a South Asian setting and, its ability to function in a crisis.

There are compelling reasons to select Bangladesh's migrant communities as a case. Writings abound on CS's construction, nature and functions regarding democracy, socio-economic development, the rule of law, human rights, and social change (White 1999, Lewis 2011, Zafrullah and Rahman 2002). Yet the thriving sector of labour migration has so far received scant attention in the mainstream writings on CS and Bangladesh, a country of emerging CSOs and a major source of international labour migrants. More importantly, migrants were among the communities hard-hit by the pandemic. Bangladeshi migrants lost their jobs and suffered discrimination, detention, non-payment of wages and deportation (Siddiqui 2021). Stranded aspirant and visiting migrants became uncertain about their return to jobs due to travel bans, lockdowns and economic recessions in their countries of employment (Ibid.). While CS in different contexts played a pivotal role in the alleviation and dissipation of societal troubles associated with the epidemic (Kövér 2021), it is appropriate and pertinent to look into the strength and resilience of the Bangladeshi CSOs as they tried to safeguard migrants' rights and well-being at home and abroad. This is an important foundation for cross-country comparison of institutional and structural arrangements between the state and CS.

Notes on Methodology

The study employs a combination of qualitative social science methods. Existing literature has been reviewed to gain conceptual clarity and relate to the Bangladesh context. Content analysis of the *Daily Star* – a renowned English daily – has been done for the period of March 2020 through June 2021. Websites of migration CSOs have been visited to follow Covid interventions. These findings were then triangulated with Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with CS leaders and CSO executives. Essential insights and findings are also drawn from the author's participation in national and regional consultations arranged by CSOs.

The article is organised into six sections. The section after this introduction discusses the key concepts and theories that underlie the discussion and analysis in this article. The third section sets the scene by describing the evolution of migration CSOs activities in Bangladesh. Based on in-depth interviews, content analysis of news and observation, the fourth section highlights CSOs' Covid-time activities. The fifth section analyses the pandemic time CS relations with other actors in terms of autonomy, solidarity and participation. In conclusion, the main findings and arguments are summarised.

The Concept and Theories of CS

The concept of CSOs vis-à-vis state

'Civil society' in this article refers to a sphere outside the state where, in order to pursue common enterprises, rational, self-determining individuals voluntarily form groups or organisations share interests and communicate over matters (Kymlicka 2002, Edwards 2009). This article adopts a broader definition of 'civil society' to encompass a wide variety of organised efforts and interventionist measures undertaken by actors, including conscious individuals, organisations, and associations of organisations. Following common usage in Bangladesh, CS organisations that were formed to supplement government services for the common public good often function as pressure groups. They criticise government policy and action and advocate for specific policy changes. This article draws special attention to the activities of CSOs that have an interest in the welfare of former, current and potential future migrant workers from Bangladesh.

The purpose and function of civil society

Classical philosophers such as Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke and Hegel identified CS as a society with certain ideals and values that require both creative and value-based actions to balance the otherwise overbearing influence of the state authority (see Khilnani and Kaviraj 2001). Early theorists described CS as a 'Third Sphere' after the state and the market, which often are presented as standing in stark opposition to each other despite taking many hybrid forms in practice. (Chandhoke 2009). In the age of neoliberalism, CSO functions were reduced to service provisioning for improved aid effectiveness (Weisbrod 1978). Strong and independent NGOs and citizen movements have become signs of good governance (Ibid.). Contemporary academics tend to analyse CSO roles in participatory governance by referring to their rules, practices and narratives (Pauly et al. 2016). In recent years, infiltration theory, which approaches CS in terms of interdependence rather than independence of its component CSOs, has gained some currency (Klein and Lee 2019). This theory draws on the idea that the boundaries between CSO, the state and the market are somewhat permeable (Van Til 1995) and members of each set of actors engage in forward and backward infiltration. According to this theory, CSOs infuse and interact with market and state through policies of influence, substitution and occupation (Ibid.).

While the infiltration model offers an important analytical tool to examine the possible permeations of CSOs into the government, the article also considers the efficacy of supplementary, complementary and adversarial models to explain how CSOs engaged themselves in service provision during the pandemic (Young 2006). In the supplementary

model, CSOs are seen as fulfilling the demand for public goods left unsatisfied by the government. In this view, the private financing of public goods can be expected to have an inverse relationship with government expenditure (Ibid.: 39). In the complementary view, CSOs are considered government partners that help deliver largely government-financed public goods. The adversarial model emphasises the CSO's role in pressurising the government to formulate or change public policy to reflect the public interest, and to maintain accountability to the public; governments typically respond by exerting control over adversarial CSO activities (Ibid.: 40). The three perspectives are not mutually exclusive and can appear simultaneously in CSO-state relations in the form of cooperation, co-optation, complementarity, and confrontation (Najam 2000). The above lenses help to explain CSO responses to pandemic-affected Bangladeshi migrants.

The values shaping state-civil society relations

Scholars identify CS as a site that mediates society's relationship with the state (Chandhoke 2009). In western philosophy, CS is contrasted with the state, which is conceived of as an indispensable instrument for securing an order in which ordinary individuals can pursue their social and organisational activities without harming one another (See Khilnani and Kaviraj 2001). In non-western traditions, however, 'state' contains a variety of concepts: control, coercion, domination, and so on (Ibid.). The mass of associations in CS keeps the state in check (Ibid.). In effect, the government–CS relationship is determined by broader social, political, and economic realities (Salamon and Anheier 1998).

CSO–state relations are also measured along the dimensions of autonomy (Read 2008), partnership (Sørvoll and Bengtsson 2019) and inward and outward solidarity (Foley and Edwards 1996). Autonomy indicates that CS strikes a balance with other actors, and this autonomy depends on the ability of CS to protect itself against the state and the market (Cohen and Arato 1997). Partnership, which refers to collaboration among CS actors and the state in pursuit of common or complementary ends, helps explain how power is shared between the CS and the state for better public policy outcomes based on the needs of communities. It is the arena where citizens become part of the implementation process. Solidarity means conforming to the norms of reciprocity and mutual support within and among groups for the common interest. The above framework will be used in this article to analyse migration CSOs' engagement with the state amid the pandemic.

The Bangladesh Context: Labour Migration and CSOs

Civil society actions surrounding labour migration in Bangladesh commenced in the 1990s, when the state's remittance-based development vision prompted it to export its citizens abroad. More than 13 million Bangladeshi citizens migrated abroad to join the international labour force between 1976 and 2021 (BMET 2021). Of them, a large majority of low-skilled Bangladeshis are concentrated in the oil-rich Middle Eastern countries and the newly industrialised Southeast Asia, whereas skilled migrants and professionals have a strong presence in Europe and North America. Around 1200 licensed recruitment agencies and thousands of informal intermediaries at home, together with employers, recruitment agents and the existing migrant' communities in destination countries, comprise a network that facilitates overseas labour migration from Bangladesh.

Acknowledging the importance of remittances for the national economy and easing the unemployment problem, successive governments of Bangladesh (GoB) have declared labour migration a 'thrust sector' and took initiatives to modernise its migration services, and a full-fledged Ministry for Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment (MoEWOE) was established in 2001. A ban on semi-skilled and unskilled female migration was lifted in 2003 and 'decent work' principles have been introduced in bilateral agreements and memorandums of understanding (MoUs) signed with labour-recruiting countries. Several national laws and policies were also enacted to regulate labour migration from Bangladesh, including the Overseas Employment and Migrants Act (OEMA) 2013 and the Wage Earners' Welfare Board Act 2018. In its 8th five-year plan (2021–2025) the GoB emphasises, among other issues, the need to improve the skills base for the development of new overseas labour market opportunities, ensure the protection of migrants' human and labour rights, review existing policies to promote migration-sensitive health policies and strategies, and incorporate female migrant workers' issues.

Preceding the above developments, the 1990s witnessed increased advocacy and programme activities anchored in rights-based discourses, as well as the qualitative and quantitative expansion of CSOs that are devoted to the causes of migrants (Reyes 2013). Three CSOs born in the 1990s – the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), Welfare Association of Returnee Bangladeshi Employees (WARBE) and the Association for Female Migrant Workers in Bangladesh (BOMSA) – were instrumental in influencing public policy on migrants' rights amid the growing importance of labour migration from Bangladesh (Ibid.). RMMRU, an affiliate of the University of Dhaka, has been engaged in evidence-based migration research, training and policy advocacy since

1996, when hardly any normative or institutional framework for migration governance existed. WARBE was established by some returnee migrant workers in 1997 to build awareness at the grassroots and enterprise development levels in migration-rich areas. One year later, BOMSA started its journey to unite and protect the welfare of female migrants of Bangladesh by offering both pre and post-departure support and training.

The following decade observed the rise of yet another group of CSOs. OKUP (Migrant Worker Development Program), a community-based migrant workers' organisation in Bangladesh, was formed in 2004 to promote migration through legal pathways, fair and ethical recruitment, migrants' access to basic services, access to justice, climate migration, and sustainable reintegration and livelihoods of migrants and left-behind families, as well as the protection of migrants' children. Finally, BRAC, the world's largest NGO, appeared on the scene in 2007, when it undertook a safe migration project. Later, it introduced large-scale facilitation, counselling and reintegration support to returnees from Europe and elsewhere.

The past decade has seen few new CSO arrivals in the migration sector. In some cases, individuals left existing CSOs to form their own donor-supported organisations. The sector also witnessed the permeation of labour and human rights organisations into the migration sector. Often, the newcomers competed with pioneer CSOs over donor support and government patronage.

International Organisations comprise a large part of the Third Sector's activities on migration in Bangladesh. The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have mandates to work for labour migrants and migrants, respectively. ILO has had a long presence in Bangladesh on labour issues. It began its operation for migrant workers during the mid-1990s, when it commissioned some studies on migration that could inform its advocacy work. In 2010, at the request of the GoB, it implemented a 10-year project to develop normative frameworks for migration and improve migration services. IOM activities regarding Bangladeshi migrants started with the repatriation of 63,000 Bangladeshis from the Gulf during the 1990 Persian Gulf crisis (IOM 2021). In 1998, it established a regional office for South Asia in Dhaka and funded research and awareness-raising programmes on migration and trafficking issues for policy development (Ibid.). Later, it initiated its own research and policy intervention programme, in partnership with the government and local CSOs. In recent years, the European Union, the British Council, DfID and USAid also initiated

large and medium projects, while independent development organisations such as CARE Bangladesh, Winrock International and Helvetas mobilised funds to implement migrant programmes through local CSOs. Catholic church-based organisations (e.g., Caritas Bangladesh) and trade unions (e.g., American Solidarity Centre) also have some activities regarding migrant workers.

Over time, these CSOs have been able to create networks among themselves. The Bangladesh Civil Society for Migrants (BCSM) was created in 2016 in the context of the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), with RMMRU serving as its secretariat. Without having a legal entity, the forum became an important migrant advocacy tool. Since 2017, WARBE has been working as the secretariat of the Migrants' Rights Forum Bangladesh (BOOF), an alliance of more than 112 CSOs working at the grassroots for the socio-economic development of migrants, children, and women. These are forums for dialogue, discussion and national consultation whenever the members want to raise issues with the government. Almost all local migration CSOs are connected to regional forums such as the Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA), CARAM Asia, and the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), which take migration issues into regional and global consultative processes like the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, the Colombo Process, and so on.

It is in the above framework that migration-focused CSOs responded to the Covid–19 pandemic. In what follows, their role in the pandemic is documented on the basis of interviews conducted with CSO executives and other stakeholders.

The Role of Civil Society during the Pandemic

The Covid–19 pandemic left CSOs with an unusual and unprecedented situation regarding migrants and their families. By March 2020, many Bangladeshis had lost their jobs abroad and were forced to quarantine in labour sheds without much support (Rashid et al. 2021). Sometimes, employers send them back without paying wages (Ibid.). Thousands of aspirant migrants could not migrate due to flight closures and job cuts (Ibid.). Upon return, most migrants faced yet another round of stigmatisation and discrimination, as they were considered the bearer of the disease from abroad (Ibid.). Red flags raised in front of returnee houses added a layer of stigma to their social isolation. Lockdowns on the one hand and the lack of access to livelihood on the other left many migrant families in dire need of food and cash (BRAC 2021).

Observing the relative deprivation of the migrants from formal social support, RMMRU brought senior researchers together to prepare a strategy paper (Siddiqui et al. 2020) for the government, and also disseminated it through the media. This research became the foundation for a concerted campaign advocating the allocation of government funds and interest-free loans for migrants and their families. RMMRU and 15 other CSOs urged the prime minister to establish a fund for Bangladeshi migrants and their families who were suffering from the economic consequences of the coronavirus outbreak. In April 2021, RMMRU collaborated with MFA to organise a conference where political leaders of Asian countries suggested creating funds and launching financial instruments to ensure the sustainable reintegration of migrant workers affected by the coronavirus pandemic. In its small ways, RMMRU distributed food and facemasks in grassroots working areas in Tangail. A few weeks later, the GoB declared that Tk. 20 million (US$ 236,000) from the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund would be allocated to projects that supported migrants.

As Covid–19 hit the migrant community, WARBE, in consultation with donors, moulded its existing activities of pre-departure awareness and migrants' access to justice into pandemic services. For example, pre-decision grassroots meetings were converted into 'Covid-awareness meetings', and 'mediation teams' became involved in psycho-social counselling, especially in cases where domestic violence appeared. Returnees were provided with counselling, food and protection materials. At the grassroots level, WARBE started creating awareness about the 'Covid carrier' stigma against migrants and their families. It also negotiated with local governments to end the practice of erecting red flags at migrants' houses. With the help of religious and community leaders, returnees were asked to be more careful in their movements and Covid testing. WARBE made a list of Covid-affected migrant households in its six working areas and collected information about the plights of the migrants for advocacy and support purposes.

OKUP also started an online campaign against hanging red flags in front of Covid–infected migrant households. At the union level, the 44 helpline was established. From April to June 2020, the organisation gave online counselling to 6000 migrants and documented that around 40 per cent of the migrants did not receive salaries at their destinations and 25 per cent of them faced economic hardship, as they had run out of savings. OKUP connected many of these families with GoB support systems. It also started a campaign to extend the social safety net by making comprehensive plans to reintegrate jobless migrants and allocate 10 per cent of remittance tax receipts to migrant-worker well-being. OKUP participated in BCSM's consultative process to inform and sensitise

the government regarding migrant needs. OKUP prepared a list of 3000 migrants in its project areas and persuaded the government to pay Tk.700,000 (US$ 8200) to 1500 people in its project areas. OKUP reached around 1,000,000 vulnerable migrants who remained trapped abroad, through its online Facebook pages *#Ovibashi Tomai Salam* (Migrant, Salute to You) and Remittance *Yoddya* (Remittance Soldiers). Government notices and circulars issued by both destination countries and the GoB, translated into easy-to-read Bengali, informed these migrants in posters, small clips and motion, and were also made available for offline use. OKUP diverted some of its funds toward providing 677 migrant households with a modest food package worth Tk. 3000 (US$ 35) each, and also completed cash transfers, through online payment services, to 1025 migrant households. OKUP's community-based migrants' forums raised around Tk. 3,900,000 (US$ 46,000) from diaspora members and their social networks.

BRAC's Covid intervention started with a campaign against returnee stigmatisation**.** It established a booth at the airport and supported migrants from its centre near the airport. From April 2020, BRAC started delivering services to migrants. Its reintegration centre near the airport was converted into a 500-bed migrant quarantine space. The following month, it conducted the 'Impact of Covid–19' survey to assess the condition of the migrants. Based on the findings, it sanctioned Tk. 30 million (US$ 355,000) emergency cash support to 8000 migrants using online services. In July–August 2020, the organisation started psychological, social and economic support services for the returnees. Around 4000 returnees were provided with telephone counselling for small and medium enterprise development and skills training. The head of BRAC's Migration Programme explained, 'We realised that it was not time of policy advocacy, rather service delivery, as badly affected migrants were returning and needed support.' In the second year of Covid, BRAC continued the support services and applied the lessons it learned during the first year. 'However, such support services were insufficient and covered only a portion of what was needed for the migrants,' he continued.

Likewise, smaller CSOs including BOMSA and Bangladesh Nari Shramik Kendra (BNSK) arranged awareness campaigns and government advocacy to uphold migrants' rights during the pandemic. In their modest capacity, they also supplied protection materials, food and cash.

Leveraging collective platforms

The collective role of CSOs was understood to be even more essential than their individual efforts. RMMRU capitalised on its network in BCSM to highlight the plight of the migrants. A letter was sent to the United Nations Secretary-General to solicit his Good Offices function to find redress for migrants who had experienced arbitrary deportation. Regionally, it garnered support and appreciation from other rights groups like the Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA), which followed up on the issue of 'wage theft' and started collecting cases from members for campaign purposes. Without any budgetary allocation, BCSM members gathered grassroots information for documentary evidence of the plight of migrant workers and their families (MFA 2021). RMMRU organised national and international webinars under BCSM's banner, sharing their research findings and urging the government to allocate stimulus packages and recovery plans for migrants and returnees. C.R. Abrar, an eminent human rights activist and the Executive Director of RMMRU, reports that 'Our research and advocacy had a sustained impact on sanctioning recovery and loan packages to Covid returnees.' RMMRU, along with other migrant rights and advocacy organisations, urged countries of origin and destination to conduct a gender-responsive evaluation of the Covid–19 crisis and prepare recovery packages that prioritised low-skilled migrant workers.

WARBE collaborated with MFA in its regional endeavour to flag 'wage theft'. WARBE collected cases of migrants whose salaries had not been paid for their last five or six months of work. WARBE also organised an online meeting with BOOF members to share experiences and discuss the possible replication of activities. According to Syed Saiful Haque, a pioneer migrants' rights activist and the Chairman of WARBE,

> WARBE leveraged its working relations with the members of the Parliamentarians Caucus on Migration and Development, launched in 2017, to inform them about the migrants' condition. We encouraged them to initiate awareness campaigns in their respective constituencies. In this way, we persuaded them to speak for migrants.

Autonomy, Solidarity and Partnership

The above discussion indicates the various ways in which CSOs distributed 'public goods' to migrants (Yough 2006). Leading CSOs made four types of interventions, namely, survey and research, advocacy, material assistance, and awareness campaign. While think tanks

like RMMRU felt the need for policy advocacy to make justice to the research findings and a grassroots link for the articulation of migrant demands, WARBE and OKUP used surveys to prepare a database for evidence-based intervention. BRAC already had research, advocacy and service delivery capacities when it entered the migration services field. As the previous section shows, CSOs carried out and advocated for public services that had not been guaranteed or sufficiently supplied by either the market or the government (Ibid). In doing so, they developed a remarkable level of outward solidarity with regional organisations. As C.R. Abrar of RMMRU described it:

> RMMRU and BCSM became the "pace setters" in terms of highlighting the plights of the migrants at the regional level, whereas MFA was instrumental in bringing evidence to regional initiatives such as the Abu Dhabi Dialogue, to put pressure on receiving countries for a more humane behaviour with migrants in the pandemic.

Unlike their experiences in India, China and Turkey, CSOs in Bangladesh were not prevented or blocked by the government, which did not undercut the ability of CSOs to contribute to the process of mitigating the pandemic and its consequences (Tandon and Aravind 2021, Sidel and Hu 2021, Dogan and Genc 2021). Rather, they came up with support for pandemic-affected migrants and their families, even when the government failed to respond to the migrants' predicament. Independently and collectively, they performed tasks that governments are meant to perform. CSO responses to Covid–19 depended to a large extent on their size, network and financial strength. Unlike the experience in many Western countries, the GoB did not supply CSOs with the necessary financial resources (NPF 2021). Again, it is this very fact that enabled civil society to maintain a degree of autonomy and distinctiveness from the state and other economic actors, even as mutual support and recognition were visible (Klein and Lee 2019). Later, when the government began to provide cash and material support, CSOs reduced their voluntary contributions to public goods.

State–civil society partnership

The permeations of CSO activities into those of the state have disparate forms and strategies (Young 2006). This general dynamic is clearly present in Bangladesh. Regarding migration, like other settings, the relationship between the GoB and civil society can be classified along two criteria: the level of government involvement and the public policy stage (Kövér 2021). Almost all interviewed CSO executives claimed that, compared to the

other countries in the region, CSO participation and engagement with the government on migration issues is generally high in Bangladesh. Both sectors developed simultaneously, as discussed in the preceding sections. Yet, the extent to which CSO suggestions were recognised and duly taken into account by the GoB depended on the government's priorities. To CSOs, though, 'The MoEWOE has created a WhatsApp group to receive CSO inputs' or 'the Minister himself is eagerly attending CS webinars' and 'Labour attachés and GoB officials are making themselves available in CSO programmes' are signs of an embryonic state–CS relationship and growing CS solidarity with the state.

Though the government was late in responding, it eventually appeared to be the 'single-actor-play-on-stage'. Its 2021 commitment of Tk. 70 million (US$ 827,000) for Covid-affected migrants and their families dwarfed the combined efforts of the country's CSOs. A similar resumption of government responsibility in 2021 was seen in many other countries in the South (see Kövér 2021). In theory, the larger the state's field of action, the greater the possibility for the development of CS (Salamon and Anheier 1998). In practice within this framework, however, only the largest service-providing NGOs such as BRAC could partner with GoB to deliver services and facilitate returnee reintegration. In effect, among Bangladesh's CSOs, BRAC's service delivery capacity was unparalleled, given its size, human capacity, network and accessibility across the country, as well as its self-sustained status and access to relatively large donor funds. BRAC thus had been able to complement GoB's work. Having no recourse to such opportunities, other CSOs either realigned their awareness-raising projects with the Covid situation or found it their solemn responsibility to persuade the government to allocate funds for migrants.

On the public policy stage, all frontline CSOs were quite active. The RMMRU, BOMSA, WARBE and others had a long footprint of policy advocacy with the government. During the pandemic, they fully utilised their credentials and means as they campaigned for the protection of migrant rights. Smaller and grassroots-level CSOs expressed 'outward solidarity' with these endeavours to influence state policies in favour of migrants. State–CS relations took a new shape as the government started paying attention to CSO analyses of migrants' problems. Pressure on the government was mounting. Consequently, GoB involved INGOs and CSOs as it designed post-Covid recovery plans, collected information and eased reintegration. The largest CS contribution of most CSOs was in changing the mindset of the government towards migrants and persuading them to sanction a sizable amount of money for salvation from the government coffer. This motivational function of

CSOs is not unique to Bangladesh, though it is rare in South Asia and even in other sectors in Bangladesh.

It would, however, be naïve to claim that CS's role was unobstructed. Within the pre-existing GoB–CSO relationship, CSOs could not be disregarded by the state, but it indirectly controlled their abilities to contribute to the process – a model coined as 'adversarial' by Young (2006). Almost all CSOs were critical of several steps taken by GoB, such as the allocation of cash incentives from WEWF (which is funded directly from migrants' compulsory contributions), lack of negotiation with the CoDs regarding the return of the migrants, lack of quarantine facilities at the airport, and so on. Yet, CSOs could not afford to be uncompromising. The Bangladesh state retains control over CSOs through its normative and administrative frameworks. In October 2016, Bangladesh enacted a controversial new law titled Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Law 2016, which superseded earlier laws regulating the work and activities of foreign-funded Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) (LOC 2021). The Act requires CSOs seeking to receive or use foreign funds to register, seek prior approval and submit reports regularly to the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) after receiving such grants (GoB 2016). The Act also empowers the NGOAB to inspect, monitor and assess CSO activities at the NGOAB's discretion, and CSOs must secure approval and security clearance before hiring foreign specialists and advisers. All migration-oriented CSOs implement donor-funded projects and hence have to maintain a 'not-anti-government' image for smooth approval of donor-funded projects by NGOAB. Specific autonomy of the CSOs during the pandemic was thus indirectly affected by the generally 'restrictive' government control apparatus. This particular determinant of CSO–state relations may be explained on the ground of the state's adherence to communitarian principles that see the role of the state as pivotal and its intervention in CSO activities as legitimate (Walzer 1998). Ironically, classical social democracies often assert the appropriateness of state centrality in social and economic life, and often distrust CS (Giddens 1998).

Inter-civil society relations

Despite disagreements as to what the CSO role for migrants affected by the pandemic should be, inward and outward solidarity among CSOs was evident (Sørvoll and Bengtsson 2019). Although partnerships among CSOs were limited, executives from almost all leading CSOs agreed that the pandemic united them and that the need for collective and concerted efforts for advocacy was greater than ever. New and old platforms became advocacy vehicles, and like-minded CSOs assembled under formal and informal alliances for survey, research,

advocacy and grassroots-level intervention. As in Hungary and South Korea (see Kövér et al. 2021, Jeong and Kim 2021), 'inward solidarity' was observed in Bangladesh: small and weak CSOs, mostly working in rural areas, were supported by the bigger and stronger ones who launched campaigns and made donations to migrants and their families. Some level of commitment tied the CSOs into a cohesive social collectivity during the crisis (Rehg 2007). And in some cases, organisations' collective goals transcended the interests of individual organisations (Sørvoll and Bengtsson 2019).

The diversity, division and internal competition for funds and power are often 'black-boxed' when CSOs are considered as a homogenous group (Jordan and Van Tuijl 2000). The 'division' among CSOs has already been identified as a concern for CSO–state–market partnerships in service delivery in the South because of the CSO's financial dependence on others (Manor 2002). Yet the pandemic manifested a new form of inter-CSO discord as and when newly emerged CSOs wanted to build their own platforms and conduct advocacy and action work independently of the established CSOs. A head of an established CSO regarded such acts as 'performed to show allegiance to the government and attract funding in a bid to receive more exposure and benefit.'

By and large, coordination among CSO activities was absent during the pandemic, for a number of reasons. Some interviewees saw it as a consequence of 'personal and organisational ego', 'selfishness' and 'promotion of narrow interest', while others highlighted the 'government's active role and control over CSO interventions'. Again, others opined that 'donor dependency' and adherence to 'the culture of project implementation' hindered the ability of CSOs to get sustained and combined results, and that this dynamic was aggravated during the pandemic.

The role of INGOs

In countries dominated by authoritarian regimes, CSOs are subjected to direct legal and/or top-down political control by an all-embracing state. In contrast, in more democratic and market-based countries, where state–CS cooperation takes the form of participation and collaboration, resource dependency might jeopardise CSO autonomy (Kövér 2021). Bangladesh belongs somewhere in the middle, where CSOs' role in the pandemic was influenced not only by the state but also by international donors and INGOs. In effect, unlike in the North, where donations from individuals are more easily obtainable, CSOs in the South depend on donors amid conditions of scarcity (Manor 2002). Though relations between INGOs and CSOs may take various forms – bottom-up, top-down and

alliance (Longhofer et al. 2016) – INGOs in Bangladesh mostly work with the mandate of 'CS Empowerment' through providing resources and thus often increasing antagonism and noncooperation between NGOs and mainstream CS actors (Stiles 2002). As a key informant commented:

> CSOs are "donor dependent" and donors hardly encourage innovation or recognise the needs and cultural context of the migrants. Without taking a critical stance, they [INGOs] are too happy to support GoB initiatives, implemented by themselves. In order to get access, INGOs who are also considered an important part of CS resort to government appeasement instead of making constructive criticism of government policy and actions. They themselves often compete for large funding and implement "projects" through national and local CSOs.

Amid the pandemic, ILO, IOM and UN Women had their own activities: making predictions and warnings, sensitising the government to migrants' needs, performing evidence-based research and providing technical assistance as the government made its post-Covid recovery plan. At the start of the pandemic, the ILO called on the government for immediate, large-scale, coordinated actions to safeguard employees at work, boost the economy, and support jobs and income. It also urged the government to adopt policies to safeguard stranded migrant workers and facilitate their reintegration. ILO supported MoEWOE in developing a strategy paper titled 'Post-Pandemic Strategic Roadmap for the Labour Migration Sector', which included immediate, midterm and long-term agendas for action related to returnee migrant workers. As the coordinator of the Bangladesh United Nations Network on Migration, IOM contributed to the body of evidence intended to support government-led efforts. It also helped the GoB launch the Returning Migrants Management of Information Systems (ReMiMIS) platform. UN Women, MoEWOE and Private sector-Unilever jointly launched a project aiming at supporting around 50,000 female returnees with emergency food, health and hygiene products, and skill training in 10 districts of Bangladesh.

The above activities were beyond the scope of national CSOs, whose donors rarely allowed CSOs to divert their funds from pre-approved projects, and also generally reduced their contributions to CSO budgets during the pandemic.

Conclusion

An attempt has been made in this article to unfold the dynamics of CSO responses against the plights of Bangladeshi migrants. Using the lens of the coronavirus pandemic, the article shows the crucial ways in which CSOs came forward to champion the causes of the affected migrants and returnees. As it revealed, the CSOs stood beside the migrants, offered them humanitarian support, denounced misconceptions about their spreading of the coronavirus and demanded state intervention. Thus, initially, a supplementary role for CSOs was imminent, though it was severely restricted by the CSOs' 'donor dependence'. Despite disagreements over what should be the ideal CSO role during the pandemic; data presented here indicate that collective and individual CSO activities and joint undertakings amplified during the calamity.

The study found an evolving relationship between the state and the CS surrounding the pandemic. While the state was late in recognising the migrants' multi-dimensional predicament, CSOs came forward with whatsoever means they had at their disposal. Beyond their supplementary role, a host of CSO activities were geared towards persuading the government to mobilise its own funds for the migrants. During Covid–19, the GoB was more open to CSOs than at any other time. Although the state–CSO relation can generally be described as adversarial, confrontation was rarely observed during the pandemic. CSOs capitalised on relations embedded within their domestic and global networks. There were both convergence and divergence of CSO–donor agency relations because of the former's dependence on the latter. Constrained by endowment, CSOs tailored their donor-driven activities as required.

CSO's relations with all actors are differently influenced by values such as autonomy, solidarity and partnership. While complementing government activities was of huge importance, leading CSOs maintained a degree of autonomy in their actions and, where necessary, took a critical stance. Undeniably, the crisis was a litmus test for CSOs and their performance shows well their ability to champion the causes of the migrants by making independent and collective efforts among themselves and with the state, even in challenging times. Both inward and outward solidarity among CSOs and other actors were evident as they provided assistance, moral support and policy intervention. The financial weakness of most CSOs marred partnerships among CSOs and between CSOs and the state; the government itself appears to have been the largest actor when it came to assembling and providing resources for migrants. CSO participation in service provision

was severely constrained by the reduced flow of funding from donors, which themselves were badly affected by the global pandemic.

The article thus re-discovers the enormous potential of CSOs to influence the state to deliver necessary protection to citizens during an emergency. The pandemic and migration lenses also elucidated the implications of disaster preparedness and proactive responses by state and CS alike in times of crisis. The importance of the above findings lies in identifying the power, strength and resilience of CSOs during emergencies and crises, as they also learned to be more proactive than reactive, compassionate and supportive to each other. These have added insights into CSO- Bangladesh literature, which often generalises the state–CSO relations as vague and interest-driven. The case study portrays a hereto unexplored model of state and civil society's orchestration of multilateral cooperation in a South Asian context. It thus has significant theoretical and practical implications for future research and policies regarding how CSO roles can best be coordinated and complemented by the state and other actors in times of crisis.

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