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Role and Performance in Turbulent Times

Edited by Mária Murray Svidroňová

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Meet the editor

Mária Murray Svidroňová focuses on the economics and management of the nonprofit sector and civil society. She is particularly interested in social innovation issues in public service provision, for example, through co-creation, behavioral interventions, and civic activism. She has been involved in several international studies dealing with public service innovation and civic engagement (7RP, H2020, COST). She is a recognized expert not only in the academic field but also in practice. In cooperation with the Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Government for the Development of Civil Society, she participated in the preparation of legislative changes in the field of financing NGOs. She runs her own civic association.

Contents

Preface

This book explores the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), also referred to as civil society organizations, and their crucial role in governance, especially in times of crisis. In an era marked by unprecedented challenges like COVID-19, climate change, or war in Ukraine, the third sector emerges with its helping hand. The traditional governance structures did not manage to react swiftly and sufficiently enough to these large-scale events.

The first section of the book, "Role of NGOs in Refugee Crises and Migration", explores the role and performance of NGOs in governance in Central and East European countries and neighboring regions with a focus on NGOs that help to overcome the influence of COVID-19 and/or war in Ukraine, as well as NGOs assisting in developing new services aimed at refugees and other victims of the recent crises.

The second section, "NGOs: Democracy, Polarization and Resilience", explores the role of NGOs in addressing issues such as migration, human rights, polarization, and democracy in general.

The last section, "NGOs in Developing Countries", delves into the functions that NGOs play in the socioeconomic development of developing countries like India or Indonesia.

This edited volume explores how NGOs operate independently and in collaboration with other sectors to shape the provision of public services and the public good, especially in response to various crises. Through well-conducted research chapters, this book shows the importance of volunteering, creating support and integration structures, and the factors affecting the sustainability and resilience of NGOs.

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Section 1

Role of NGOs in Refugee Crises and Migration

Chapter 1

The Role of Non-State Actors and Cities in Global Migration and Refugee Governance

Raphaela Schweiger

Abstract

The multilateral system on migration is facing more and more significant and intersecting challenges: from the climate crisis, rising numbers in forced displacement, to labour needs in many parts of the world, and drastic changes to our world due to disruptive technologies—governments alone cannot address these complexities. This chapter delves into the role of non-state actors and cities in shaping global migration and refugee regimes, particularly in turbulent times. Drawing from extensive research and practical experience, the author examines the evolving landscape of global migration governance, focusing on the influence of non-state actors (NSAs) and cities. Key questions explored include the impact of global compacts on migration and refugees on NSA and city engagement, challenges and opportunities in global processes and fora, and the necessity of stakeholder involvement for effective migration governance. The chapter advocates—based on her research—for increased collaboration between international organizations, states, civil society, and cities, emphasizing the importance of inclusive decision-making to address the complexities of migration on a global scale.

Keywords: global migration governance, city diplomacy, refugee leadership, global compact for migration, global compact on refugees, refugee regime, non-state actors

1. Introduction

Throughout the history of nation-states, the regulation of migration—deciding who enters and exits—has been regarded as a cornerstone of state sovereignty. Over the past century, international norms, standards, and cooperative processes have evolved to facilitate the movement of individuals for employment opportunities and to offer refuge to those facing persecution. Notably, certain economic blocs have embraced the concept of unrestricted movement within their respective regions, exemplified by initiatives like the European Union (EU).

At both national and local levels, non-state actors (NSAs) such as civil society organizations, internationally operating NGOs (INGOs), the private sector, trade unions, local authorities, and faith-based groups have played pivotal roles in the integration and facilitation of migration processes. Notably, certain groups, particularly INGOs, have demonstrated extensive involvement and international collaboration

spanning decades, particularly in advocating for the rights and protection of displaced communities. However, the reluctance of states to fully integrate migration into the international system, beyond the scope of refugee protection, has historically limited opportunities for NSAs to engage meaningfully in the international system on this issue, particularly until the early 2000s.

This book chapter delves into the emergence of global governance and the refugee regime, how actors other than states have managed to slowly get a seat at the table, how the global compacts on migration and refugees, both adopted in 2018, changed the way NSAs and cities engage in global processes, and will address challenges and opportunities ahead.

I posit that the forthcoming five years will serve as a pivotal juncture for the multilateral framework concerning migration. Confronted with formidable and interconnected obstacles such as the climate emergency, escalating rates of forced displacement, global labour demands, and profound transformations propelled by disruptive technologies, reliance solely on governmental action proves insufficient. While the international governance of migration has involved a diverse array of NSAs over the past two decades and more recently welcomed contributions from municipal and refugee leaders, we must explore novel avenues for cross-sectoral and multilevel collaboration to transform challenges into opportunities. Hence, stakeholders, in conjunction with the United Nations (UN) system and national governments, must assume leadership roles in shaping the future of migration governance, while also being provided with platforms to share insights and forge partnerships with the multilateral apparatus. Moreover, the credibility of the UN system hinges upon its inclusion of civil society, local authorities, and other stakeholders, thereby bridging global dialogs with grassroots engagement at the local and national levels.

2. Global migration governance and the refugee regime: emergence and state of play

This chapter serves to trace the trajectory of global migration governance and the refugee regime from its nascent stages in early 1900s to the contemporary landscape, assessing the role actors other than states have played over time.

Global migration governance, akin to the broader concept of global governance proposed by James Rosenau, pertains to the norms and organizational structures governing and facilitating states' and other actors' responses to migration [1]. Its primary objective is to ensure collective action among states to achieve objectives more effectively than acting individually—by the formulation of binding laws, norms, and agreements alongside non-binding normative frameworks; its embeddedness within institutional actors and frameworks (such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), or the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR)); and the implementation of processes such as dialogs, initiatives, and informal networks at the global level or relating to migration governance [2–4].

The evolution of global migration governance can be delineated into three core phases: the early stages of migration governance and the setup of the global refugee regime (Section 2.1); putting migration and development on the agenda (Section 2.2); and the global compacts for migration and on refugees changing migration governance (Section 2.3).

2.1 The early stages and the global refugee regime

The institutions and frameworks for international migration and refugees established in the early twentieth century continue to shape contemporary migration governance. During the inter-war years, starting in 1919 with the formation of the International Labour Organization (ILO), the groundwork for migration governance was laid. The ILO then adopted conventions on labour rights, including the protection of migrant workers, and played a significant role in implementing the so-called Nansen travel documents, facilitating the movement of displaced individuals across Europe and beyond [5–7].

In response to the mass displacement and the humanitarian crises caused by the First and the Second World War, the international community embarked on a process of formulating guidelines, laws, and conventions aimed at safeguarding the fundamental human rights of individuals compelled to flee their homes due to conflict and persecution. This effort, initiated under the League of Nations in 1921, culminated in the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, a milestone in international refugee law (the Protocol removes the geographical and time-based limitations). The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol to date remains the most comprehensive codification of the rights of refugees at the global level. Further, it serves as the cornerstone of the mandate of the UNHCR, created in 1950. The Convention provides a legally binding document aimed at protecting individuals who are unable or unwilling to return to their home countries due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion [3, 5, 8–10]. Further, in response to the 1948 war, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) was established by decision of the UN General Assembly 1949, starting operations in 1950 [11].

In tandem with ongoing deliberations among influential states regarding the extent of global cooperation on matters concerning migrants and refugees, the groundwork for today's IOM was laid. Originating in 1951, the Provisional Intergovernmental Committee for the Movement of Migrants from Europe (PICMME) was established, eventually transforming into the Intergovernmental Committee for Migration (ICM) in 1980 and finally IOM in 1989. Initially focused on facilitating the transportation of migrants, PICMME was conceptualized as a "logistics agency" [12].

Hence, by the landmark decision on a legally binding instrument—the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol—and the little appetite to cooperation on the mobility of people beyond the refugee regime, the differentiation between refugees and migrants has been solidified.

Despite some progress, comprehensive frameworks for international migration remained limited during the Cold War era, with the UN hesitating to substantially engage with migration issues. This resulted in migration—beyond refugees—largely falling under the control of individual nation-states. Nonetheless, there were some notable developments reflecting migration in international norms and structures: Migration was indirectly addressed in international human rights norms, while labour migration was regulated through ILO conventions. Regional Consultative Processes (RCPs) emerged as platforms for state cooperation on migration issues, with regional mobility agreements influencing migration governance since the 1980s [3, 4, 13].

2.2 Migration and development on the agenda

While the 1990s continued to witness minimal progress on global migration governance, the early 2000s marked a notable surge in initiatives and dialogs concerning migration-related issues, albeit with a largely uncoordinated approach. For instance, the Doyle Report, the Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM), the Berne Initiative, or the appointment of Peter Sutherland as the first Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) for Migration in 2005 were pivotal in pushing for stronger migration governance [14, 15]. Further, in the 1990s and 2000s, various norms related to migration were introduced to the UN agenda, e.g. on the rights of migrant workers and domestic workers, on human trafficking, and on migrant smuggling [3, 5].

The Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), established in 2007, became the key and most prominent platform for state-led discussions on migration outside the UN. The GFMD started to facilitate knowledge exchange and policy discussions, contributing to an acknowledgment of the intersection of migration and development. Another significant milestone was the establishment of the UN High-level Dialog on International Migration and Development (HLD), which for the first time took place in 2006. While not being a process, like the GFMD, it served as a tool to address the intersection of migration and development within the UN and to connect thematically with the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) process [16].

The SDGs, unlike the MDGs, explicitly address migration, which signifies a milestone in the global development discourse. This recognition is evident in the acknowledgment of migrants' positive contributions to inclusive growth and sustainable development within the agenda's framework. Notably, the inclusion of migration-related language, such as "to ensure and facilitate safe, orderly and regular migration," [17] originated in the SDGs and subsequently influenced key documents like the New York Declaration of 2016 and the GCM of 2018 [3].

The process of integrating migration into the SDGs involved various actors beyond national governments, including UN agencies, SRSG Sutherland, think tanks, and civil society organizations. These stakeholders played instrumental roles in advocating for the inclusion of migration within the agenda, highlighting the evolving dynamics of global governance [3, 13]. However, civil society faced challenges in navigating the complex dynamics of international diplomacy at the time [18]. Nonetheless, the eventual recognition of migration within the SDGs marked a critical moment further institutionalizing migration as a global issue [13].

Further, the 2013 HLD and the GFMD process showcased an increased involvement of actors other than states. Specifically, and pioneering in global migration debates, the GFMD has expanded its scope to involve a wider array of participants, including civil society, then the private sector, and finally mayors. This progression underscores a growing understanding of the necessity for diverse stakeholders to tackle complex migration issues effectively. As a result, non-state actors, particularly civil society, the private sector, and academic experts, have become more actively engaged in global migration governance since the early 2000s, marking a notable shift towards inclusivity in addressing migration challenges [3, 5, 9, 19].

Despite these developments, challenges persisted. Migration governance lacked a cohesive vision, and fragmentation both within and outside the UN system was evident [3, 5].

2.3 The global compacts on migration and on refugees: new structures for the global governance of migration

The global rise in displacement in 2015, and movements to Europe, propelled migration onto the UN's agenda, compelling a re-evaluation of migration governance. This crisis spurred the presentation of long-standing ideas and proposals previously overlooked or refused by the UN. Consequently, traditional roles of national governments and international organizations have shifted as civil society, regions, and cities have taken on more active roles in providing refuge [3, 5, 14, 20].

Between 2015 and 2018, several pivotal moments reshaped global migration governance: the crisis response in 2015, the New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants adopted in 2016 at the UN, IOM's incorporation into the UN system in 2016 (Section 2.3.1), and the development of the two Global Compacts, one on Migration (Section 2.3.2) and one on Refugees (Section 2.3.3)—both adopted in 2018. Despite occurring over a short span, this phase marked a significant transformation in migration governance, although its full impact and implementation remain uncertain. Nonetheless, these developments facilitated swift action by the UN, convening discussions on refugee and migrant movements and establishing an architecture for international cooperation. This shift also welcomed increased participation from non-state actors, including civil society networks, businesses, religious groups, and cities, in shaping global migration policies and frameworks [3, 21–24].

2.3.1 The New York declaration and IOM's inclusion in the UN system

In September 2016 more than 100 heads of states convened in New York to jointly address migration and refugee policies for the first time. This summit resulted in the adoption of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants by the UN General Assembly, reflecting the growing urgency to respond to forced displacement and migration situations worldwide [3, 25, 26].

Civil society played a crucial role in shaping the Declaration's framing and content, highlighting the need for inclusivity and comprehensive approaches to migration issues. The Informals, a multi-stakeholder alliance convened by SRSG Sutherland, facilitated knowledge sharing and collaboration outside formal negotiations, contributing to the Declaration's development [3].

A significant decision made alongside the adoption of the New York Declaration was the inclusion of IOM into the UN system, marking another shift in global migration governance. This decision underscored the increasing recognition of migration as a pressing global issue. IOM's journey to integration into the UN system was influenced by several factors, including the heightened visibility of migration since 2015, the reframing of migration as a development issue, and concerns about the potential exclusion of IOM or the creation of a new agency for migration within the UN system—which were weighed and debated against concerns of major donor countries at the time. While welcomed by many, IOM's integration raised questions about its relationship with existing UN agencies such as UNHCR and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), as well as its specific mandate and role within the UN system [5, 13, 27–29]. Clarifying these aspects remains a challenge as the organization is navigating and defining its new status within the UN system.

The New York Declaration paved the way for significant outcomes in global migration governance, including the establishment of the Comprehensive Refugee

Response Framework (CRRF) and the initiation of processes leading to the adoption of the Global Compact for Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees. However, debates persisted regarding the development of a single comprehensive compact to address human mobility holistically, driven by concerns over existing refugee protection standards, organizational conflicts, government sensitivities, and legal complexities surrounding mixed migration [3, 30].

2.3.2 The global compact for safe, orderly, and regular migration (GCM)

The GCM, adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2018, represents a paradigm shift in international cooperation on migration, introducing a common language and reference point for addressing migration on a global scale. Its 23 non-binding objectives serve as a toolbox for managing migration in a safe, orderly, and regular manner to states, as well as non-state actors and local authorities. Unlike the GCR, the GCM is the result of a politically negotiated agreement, ushering in new structures for reporting, reviewing, and follow-up, with a significant influence over other, long-established processes outside the UN, such as the GFMD [28]. Moreover, it has facilitated the establishment of a shared infrastructure, with IOM not only joining the UN system, but also hosting the coordination and implementation infrastructure, being responsible for the UN Migration Network as well as the Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund [7].

The negotiations of the GCM were co-facilitated by Switzerland and Mexico, who were championing the inclusion of civil society, academics, and the private sector, particularly during the (pre-negotiation) consultation phase, being allies to networks and actors willing to engage in the process. Through the setup of the process, much of the content, especially the zero-draft of the GCM, stems from the input and expertise of non-state actors [3, 7]. Further, during the negotiations, mayors coordinated and stepped forward to bring much-needed local perspectives and expertise to the negotiating table, leading to much attention to the local level in the follow-up and review process of the GCM [3].

However, the negotiation process faced challenges, notably regarding concerns over sovereignty, as states grappled with the notion of ceding control over migration management, prompting tensions throughout the negotiation process. The withdrawal of the United States from the GCM negotiations under the Trump administration in late 2017 underscored the political sensitivities surrounding the agreement. Additionally, the period between the finalization of the document in July 2018 and its formal adoption in Marrakech later that year witnessed further political tensions, leading to governmental upheavals in some cases, such as the fall of the Belgian government over a vote on the GCM. Further, critics argued that the lack of robust communication strategies from the UN and governmental silence on the negotiation process provided fertile ground for political exploitation by certain groups [2, 3, 24, 28, 31].

The GCM process also presented significant hurdles for NSAs seeking to engage and contribute: Many UN member states displayed limited interest in incorporating stakeholder input, while the negotiation structure hindered their participation, relegating engagement to a voluntary and external realm. Key UN entities and individuals emerged as critical facilitators for civil society involvement. Moreover, actors possessing crucial knowledge, especially at the grassroots level, often lacked the resources and know-how to obtain accreditation as stakeholders. Even securing ECOSOC status proved to be a daunting and time-consuming task. Amidst dispersed roles and responsibilities, stakeholders grappled with uncertainty regarding the most

effective structures and constituencies to engage with. Simultaneous consultative processes further complicated decision-making. Further, a significant challenge was limited resources, both financial and temporal, hindering organizations' ability to participate in processes like the GCM or engage with UN entities. This scarcity underscores the critical issue of accessibility, determining who can ultimately participate and influence processes like the GCM [3].

Yet, the GCM has created numerous new opportunities for NSAs and cities to engage going forward: The UN Migration Network, tasked with GCM implementation, actively engages a plethora of stakeholders. Organized into thematic workstreams often co-led by UN agencies and non-governmental partners, the network conducts regional and global reviews of the GCM. Further, the Migration Multi-Partner Trust Fund's Steering Committee, tasked with funding decisions in line with GCM objectives, includes both governments and stakeholders, making it the sole mechanism within IOM structures to involve NSAs in decision-making [32, 33].

Notably, since the adoption of the GCM, where mayors have put themselves on the radar, and city leaders have played an increasingly active role in engaging with the UN system and beyond on migration issues. This engagement reflects a growing recognition of the importance of local authorities in shaping migration governance from the global to the local level. One notable development is the formation of the Mayors Migration Council (MMC), established in 2018. The MMC serves as a platform for mayors from around the world to exchange knowledge, share best practices, and advocate for policies that address the needs of migrants and promote inclusive urban development. By that, city leaders are a key "resource to bring global governance closer to the people, and an asset in the implementation of global agreements" [34]. Ever since, the MMC has been crucial in bringing local authorities' voices into global debates through strategic city diplomacy and thereby has brought city leaders at the forefront of migration fora.

The first International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) as tool to review the implementation of the GCM was convened at the UN in New York in May 2022 and resulted in the adoption of a Progress Declaration. This represents a significant achievement, especially considering the contentious debates surrounding the adoption of the GCM in 2018 [35]. Just like the GCR, the GCM takes stock at an IMRF every four years—albeit at a different rhythm. At the IMRF mayors—along with civil society and private sector stakeholders—were visibly present and "delivered the largest number of pledges to advance the GCM, [...] [and] were welcomed as speakers across the official UN program" [36]. Further, in Ref. to objective 2 of the GCM, along with C40 Cities, the MMC further pushed the agenda on climate migration, positioning city leaders as key in responding to both the challenges and opportunities [37].

The Mayor of Montreal, Valerie Plante, reflected on the contribution to global debates by saying: "I could not be prouder of what mayors have accomplished [...]. We went from being an outsider to having a seat at the table at global migration negotiations" [37]. In addition to these global developments, mayors have pushed policy agendas and implementation of new practices and collaborations on the regional, national, and local level, pushing and showcasing the benefits of a localization agenda [38]. Cities hereby present themselves as "glocal" – global and local – actors [22].

Despite its imperfections, the GCM marks a significant milestone in addressing global migration within the UN framework. As future opportunities remain uncertain, it is crucial to fully utilize the GCM's framework to navigate the complexities of migration governance. Implementation of innovative ideas—by non-state actors and local authorities, as well as multi-stakeholder partnerships operating with references to the GCM, has highlighted that shaping global migration governance is not up to states alone.

Moving forward, the GCM's relevance will depend on its implementation and review processes at various governance levels. While serving as a non-binding declaration, its establishment of benchmarks and encouragement for new agreements can pressure for comprehensive implementation.

2.3.3 The global compact on refugees (GCR)

The GCR, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2018, focuses on practical measures to support the states in implementing norms and standards, building upon the CRRF adopted along with the New York Declaration in 2016. The GCR aims to address four key objectives: easing pressures on host countries, enhancing refugee self-reliance, expanding access to third-country solutions, and supporting conditions for safe return to countries of origin. The GCR complements existing international refugee law, prioritizing responsibility sharing among states [24, 26, 39].

Led by UNHCR, the negotiation process focused on states but also invited various stakeholders, including civil society and refugees themselves, for thematic sessions and formal consultations throughout 2017 and 2018 [40]. With that the GCR influences refugee policies and debates globally.

For the implementation and review of the GCR, the UNHCR held a Global Refugee Forum twice, in 2019, shortly after the adoption of the GCR, and in 2023. While at the 2019 GRF, a small number of refugees and mayors were present, in addition to more traditional NGO players, the 2023 GRF saw a spike in engagement from these actors: Refugee leaders hosted a dedicated space, called "R-Space", that served as platform for events, visibility, and collaboration among themselves, with governments, and other stakeholders [41, 42]. Also Mayors have shown a significant presence at both the 2019 and particularly the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, highlighting their commitment to "welcoming and including refugees and displaced populations" [43]. Hence, the GRF has broadly established itself as a pledging conference for resources, protection, and pathways, as well as a gathering for stakeholders to come together.

While the GRF marks a significant forum for global debates on refugees and to unlock pledges, to influence UNHCR's policies and programs, additionally the annual meetings of the Executive Committee (ExCom) is the key platform. Increasingly states invite refugee leaders to join their delegation to such meetings and [44, 45].

3. Conclusion: a way forward for a more inclusive governance

In conclusion, the past two decades have seen a gradual empowerment of NSAs and local authorities in shaping global migration governance. Employing strategies akin to those in established policy fields such as climate change or human rights, these actors have emerged as influential agenda setters, employing strategies like blaming and shaming, forming alliances, and participating in norm-setting processes [3, 22]. Despite their limited participation in decision-making processes, their involvement remains crucial for fostering more inclusive governance.

Structurally, NSAs engage with international organizations at three levels: (1) transparency/ getting access to information, (2) voice/ being able to give input, and (3) vote/action, with the latter being the most impactful yet rarest form of participation [3]. Looking ahead, it is imperative to prioritize inclusive governance structures

that enable meaningful participation of all stakeholders for better policy outcomes and implementation on all three levels. By leveraging the expertise and influence of NSAs and local authorities alongside international organizations and states, we can shape the future of migration governance. Embracing transparency, fostering dialog, and promoting collaboration, these actors can work towards a more inclusive and effective global migration governance framework.

This book chapter provided an overview of the evolution of global migration governance and the refugee regime, highlighting the pivotal roles played by NSAs and local authorities in shaping contemporary global migration policies but also their challenges. It outlines three core phases: the early stages of migration governance and the establishment of the global refugee regime, the integration of migration and development into the international agenda, and the transformative impact of the Global Compacts on Migration and on Refugees adopted in 2018.

Historically, nation-states have viewed the regulation of migration as a cornerstone of sovereignty. However, the emergence of international norms and cooperative processes, coupled with the rise of economic blocs, has challenged traditional paradigms. NSAs, including civil society organizations and NGOs, as well as local authorities, have increasingly influenced migration governance, advocating for the rights and protection of displaced communities. The adoption of the Global Compacts on Migration and on Refugees in 2018 marked a significant shift in migration governance, providing a new common framework and infrastructure for international cooperation. These compacts facilitated increased participation from NSAs and local authorities, signaling a move towards more inclusive governance structures. Despite challenges such as political tensions, the compacts and their follow-up and review processes represent important milestones in addressing global migration issues.

While the development of the two Global Compacts was spurred by events in Syria and movements to Europe, the response to significant displacement from Ukraine has primarily been handled at a regional level, notably with the European Union activating the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD). Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the International Migration Review Forum has been convened in May 2022 as a global platform for states and NSAs to address pressing migration issues. Despite the urgency of displacement from Ukraine, it was notably absent from the agenda, likely because it falls more within the framework of refugee concerns than general migration. Some governments have expressed discontent over this omission, highlighting the lack of focus on Ukraine during the gathering [3, 46].

As of April 2024, the substantial displacement of the population in Gaza has prompted responses and appeals from organizations such as UNRWA, UNHCR, and IOM, and European governments are taking concrete measures to manage and limit movements to Europe. Filipo Grandi of UNHCR utilized the GRF in December 2023 to reiterate calls for a ceasefire and significant funding for the situation; however, current efforts predominantly focus on providing necessary immediate humanitarian aid rather than addressing longer-term political and practical solutions for affected populations [47, 48]. Beyond these displacement situations in the headlines of Western media, there are other pressing situations around the world that need attention—from Afghanistan to South Sudan, to Sudan, to Bangladesh.

Looking ahead, the multilateral framework for migration is more needed than ever, but also heavily under pressure to deliver results. With interconnected challenges such as the climate emergency and escalating rates of forced displacement, reliance solely on governmental action proves insufficient. There is a need for novel avenues of collaboration and multilevel engagement to transform challenges into opportunities,

prevent human suffering, and provide mobility as an option to people. Stakeholders, in collaboration with the UN system and national governments, must assume leadership roles in shaping the future of migration governance, ensuring inclusivity and transparency at all levels. The Global Compacts have created new opportunities for NSAs and local authorities to engage in global migration governance, emphasizing the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships in addressing complex migration issues. Moving forward, the relevance of these compacts will depend on their effective implementation and review processes, and delivering concrete results in accordance with their objectives, with the involvement of diverse stakeholders critical for success. By harnessing the expertise and resources of NSAs, local authorities, and other stakeholders, states and IOs can work towards a more inclusive and effective global migration governance framework that addresses the needs of all actors concerned.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Chapter 2

The Challenges of Ukrainian Refugees in Slovakia – Labour Market Integration Aspects with the Help of NGOs

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Abstract

Since the Second World War, the war in Ukraine has led to the largest and fastest forced displacement in Europe, when millions of Ukrainians fled abroad. The European Union reacted very swiftly to this mass influx and activated the Temporary Protection Directive, granting Ukrainians special temporary protection status, including the right to work, until March 2024. Following national legislation, the Slovak Republic has provided Ukrainians with financial assistance, accommodation, medical assistance, access to its labour markets and education for their children by active participation of Slovak NGOs. The aim of this study is to examine the challenges that young Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia face. We use data collected through a qualitative research design interview based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Although it is currently very difficult to predict the duration and outcome of the war, we expect a proportion of Ukrainian refugees will remain in Slovakia, and the longer the war lasts, the greater the proportion of those who will settle permanently in the EU Member States. Effective labour market integration is one of the key elements of EU sustainability, as it ensures individual economic self-sufficiency and promotes civic participation in the social and cultural life of host countries.

Keywords: Ukrainian refugees, labour market integration, civil participation, NGOs, Slovakia

1. Introduction

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022, has triggered the biggest migration crisis in Europe in the twenty-first century [1]. More than 11 million people have fled their homes in the 8 months of war in Ukraine [2]. More than 86 thousand people have arrived in Slovakia and requested temporary shelter, while this list does not include the 4410 refugees who have already

gone back to Ukraine and officially handed in their documents [3]. According to the statistical information provided on the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) website, there are 111,548 refugees on the territory of the Slovak Republic; Slovakia ranks fifth in terms of the number of Ukrainian refugees admitted. Russia's war against Ukraine has also significantly affected the economic situation in the country. More than half (53%) of Ukrainians who were working before the all-out war are now unemployed, 22% work regularly, 21% work remotely or part-time and only 2% have found new jobs. This is evidenced by the results of the nationwide survey Adaptation of Ukrainians to War Conditions, conducted on 19 March 2022 by the sociological group Rejting. Those most affected by the loss of employment were residents of the east of the country (74%), young people under 35 (60%) and those who left their city (66%). As a result of the war, the economic situation remained unchanged for only 18% of citizens, deteriorated significantly for 52%, and deteriorated faster for 28% [4].

Pędziwiatr and Magdziarz [5] argue that in the Visegrad Group countries (Poland, Czechia, Hungary, Slovakia) the wake of this humanitarian crisis on an unprecedented scale, the lack of experience, coupled with scarce infrastructure, insufficient legal framework and resourcing, and poor coordination of different stakeholder groups' engagement, impeded and delayed implementation of the newly established policy tools have led to the lack of an adequate and timely state-coordinated response. Like in theory and many cases [6], when the state fails, the NGOs step in with their advocacy and service role.

Ukrainians refugees had to start a new life in Slovakia, and they were forced to go through various difficulties and barriers in the process of adaptation and integration. In the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of war in Ukraine, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Slovakia immediately mobilised to help the people of Ukraine. NGOs were dedicated to distributing basic material and food aid and providing initial psychological and social support. Non-profit organisations in Slovakia have provided humanitarian assistance to refugees from Ukraine at the border since 24 February 2022 and later implemented integration activities for more than 100,000 refugees from Ukraine. Also, more than 17 thousand volunteers were involved in assisting the refugees in 2022. The volume of humanitarian aid exceeded 11 thousand tons. Almost 17 million euros were collected in public collections for aid to Ukraine in Slovakia [7]. This process in Slovakia has shown that NGOs play an important role in understanding, supporting and integrating refugees and in how cities respond to their needs.

To be consistent, the role of other players helping the migrants from Ukraine should also be underlined to illustrate the whole picture of the labour market integration process. For example, socially responsible companies were trying to adapt their recruitment processes: advertising jobs offered in the language of migrants became common, and the vacancies suitable for migrants were specified and promoted via main platforms for online and offline recruitment, etc. The official data from the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in Slovakia (available at https://www.upsvr.gov.sk) show that 39,307 migrants (22,029 women) from Ukraine were working in Slovakia in December 2023, which represented a 17.7% increase in their employment (22.2% increase for women) comparing to the situation in December 2022.

The integration of migrants into the labour market is a complicated process in which migrants face a great number of challenges and barriers. This study focuses primarily on those who have been forced to leave their country of origin. In the context of people from Ukraine, two terms are currently used – refugees and

leavers. Refugees – foreigners who have been granted temporary refuge by the Ministry of Interior on the basis of a decision of the Government of the Slovak Republic; leavers – foreigners who have been granted asylum by the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic [8].

The present study focuses on aspects of labour market integration, which are an important part of labour market transformation in all EU Member States [9]. Labour market integration policies are implemented as a part of their migration policies on different scales, with most Member States combining mainstream and tailored labour integration measures. National policies generally aim at eliminating legal obstacles to access employment and related services, while also encouraging positive actions for integration. However, there are still important gaps between the aim and the implementation of integration policies, mostly concerning the design of effective delivery methods. The examples of measures reviewed in the European Migration Network [10] show that a wide range of tools, such as one-stop shops or e-learning tools, are used to enhance labour market access. Some of the more innovative delivery approaches connect migrants with the host community, seeking to create inter-community and intergenerational links where NGOs play a vital role. Other solutions by adopting a multiple focus, coupling, for example, skills training with career mentoring and/or networking, which appear to provide an effective gateway into employment. The private sector can add significant value to national labour market integration strategies, particularly around integration into the workplace. It can play an important role in filling gaps wherever public measures fall short, particularly due to a lack of or insecure public funding.

For the explanation of labour mobility dynamics, the concept of hierarchised mobility is applied by scholars, traditionally in the context of intra-EU labour mobility [11–13]. According to this concept, unequal opportunities for workers lead to different outcomes for different groups of mobile EU workers. To understand hierarchised mobility, both socio-economic factors and regulation factors are usually taken into account. However, the most recent studies also apply the concept of hierarchised mobility in the explanation of the extra-EU labour mobility dynamics (see for instance [14]). From this perspective, the overall impacts of immigration (the balance of positive and negative effects) depend not only on the composition of the immigrant population (low-skilled vs. high-skilled workers), substitution between migrants and natives (linguistic and cultural compatibility) but also on the large extent, it also depends on the flexibility of the local labour markets. This flexibility of the local labour market refers to the local institutional context in which various stakeholders (including NGOs) can play an active role.

The main aim of the present study is to explore and map the main barriers and challenges that young Ukrainian refugees face when integrating into the labour market in Slovakia. We see this topic as important because migration is a widespread phenomenon, and it significantly affects the current situation in Slovakia. The main research question we focus our attention on is: What are the job challenges of young Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia, and what are the current barriers they face in terms of labour market integration? A subquestion is: "What role do NGOs play in helping to overcome these challenges in Slovakia?"

2. Research design

This study used interviews based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is the most recent contribution to qualitative approaches to data

analysis, introduced by Jonathan Smith and his colleagues back in the mid-1990s. Qualitative approaches are becoming increasingly popular, especially in applied fields such as health care and counselling psychology. IPA is a qualitative approach that aims to provide a detailed exploration of personal experience [15]. Although it is a relatively new methodological approach, it has become increasingly popular in the humanities, social sciences, and health sciences in recent years. It has three main theoretical underpinnings. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach, originally formulated by Husserl, which aims to produce an account of lived experience in its own terms rather than in terms prescribed by pre-existing theoretical preconceptions [16]. In IPA, therefore, the researcher is making sense of what the participant is trying to understand about what is happening to him or her. As Smith et al. [15] suggest, IPA can complement traditional methodologies (which measure "objective" or "quantitative" variables) because it provides insight into survival, psychological distress, and personal identity. To this purpose in depth, semi-structured, undirected interviews based on IPA were designed [1] to understand participants' job search needs, the current barriers they face [2], the internal processes that accompany the integration process [3], and through phenomenological interpretation to understand the subjective processes and meaning-making of the experience.

2.1 Sample and data collection

There were 10 participants in this research, and data collection was performed in November 2023 and February 2024. The research sample consisted of eight females and two males, aged between 24 and 35 years, with a total length of stay in Slovakia ranging from 6 months to 2 years. Criterion selection was used for recruitment based on the age of participants, 18 years, and their arrival in Slovakia after the war in Ukraine (February 2022). Participants are clients of Charity in Central Slovakia who visit the charity for counselling, food, or material assistance. Ukrainian refugees are a vulnerable group of people, so they were contacted through a Charity staff member. Participants for the research were approached by random selection, and they had to meet the above criteria. Then, we used the snowball sampling method [17]. Participation was voluntary and confidential. All procedures were conducted in accordance with the Ethics Committee of Matej Bel University, number 142a/2024.

2.2 Data analysis

All interviews were conducted in Ukrainian or in Slovak according to the preference of the participants, and they were transcribed and translated into Slovak with the consent of the participants for the purpose of the paper. The analysis was translated into English. For data analysis, we used thematic analysis, which is designed primarily for research in under-researched topics [18]. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, and searching for themes within data. All participant data was anonymised. According to authors Barun and Clarke [19], the reflective thematic analysis approach offers a theoretically flexible method and was used to generate themes from participants' narratives that are specific patterns of shared meaning. The author (AS) conducted the interviews, which led to the initial reflections on the data. After transcribing the interviews, each author read the transcripts in their entirety. Data analysis was conducted manually. AS led the thematic analysis, coding significant words and sections of text relevant to the research question and then synthesising these codes to create an initial mind map describing preliminary descriptive themes.

3. Results and discussion

Interviews were conducted with ten participants; the average interview length was 65 minutes, with interviews lasting between 40 and 90 minutes. The average age of participants was 28.7 years (**Table 1**).

The analysis identified four overarching themes: (1) language barrier, (2) bureaucratic barriers, (3) lack of job opportunities, and (4) experience of discrimination.

3.1 Language barrier

Involuntary refugees are likely to encounter various difficulties due to a lack of knowledge of the language of the host country. Despite the fact that the Ukrainian language is close to Slovak, a significant language barrier was felt in the interviews. Participants often stressed the language barrier when looking for a job or directly in the process of performing work tasks. Several participants said that their speech was demonstrated in the job search process and after they had started their job. P4 stated, "*I worked as a waitress in a restaurant for three days, but because I did not know the language, I was told that I could not continue working there and that the most I could do was wash dishes in the kitchen.*" Authors Gorodzeisky and Semyonov [20] describe the difficulties that refugees may encounter in integrating into society, namely, integration into society, lack of familiarity with the country's labour market when looking for a job, and other barriers that are mainly related to the language barrier. Participant 8 said in an interview that she considers the language barrier to be the biggest barrier to integration into the labour market. P8: "*If a person wants to continue in their field and in the profession, they were doing in Ukraine, they cannot move without the language. I worked in a bank in Ukraine. I have a university degree in Economics, but no one wanted to employ me in the bank without knowing the language. Now I go and clean houses, I do not need the language there, but I'm trying to learn Slovak so that I do not have to clean for a long time. Life in Slovakia is more successful if you know the language.*"

The results show that young Ukrainian refugees who were forced to leave their country because of the war have no motivation to integrate into the host country

Participant number	Gender/age
Participant 1	Female aged 26
Participant 2	Female aged 24
Participant 3	Female aged 37
Participant 4	Female aged 31
Participant 5	Female aged 32
Participant 6	Female aged 29
Participant 7	Male aged 20
Participant 8	Female aged 28
Participant 9	Male aged 25
Participant 10	Female aged 35

Source: own.

Table 1.
Characteristics of participants.

society as quickly as possible. Personal interviews highlight that all respondents from the involuntary refugees want to go back or move to another country, as documented by the statements of the following participants. P6: "*I do not plan to stay here forever. For the time being, I am comfortable with it. I am still thinking of going to Canada where they will take better care of us. My friend went there, and they gave her housing and financial help right away. In Slovakia everything is complicated*." In personal interviews, they highlighted that most of the participant want to go back, and they are just waiting in Slovakia for their home to be a safe place to return to. P9 answered this question: *"... when things calm down in Ukraine, I want to return home. Ukraine is my home, part of my family stayed there, I had a great job there, friends back home, everything.... it's very difficult for me in Slovakia now. Suddenly I live in a stranger's house, it is difficult for me to find a good job and I depend on the help of others...."*

Their integration into the labour market will be longer and more difficult, as they need to know the language of the host country to read the contract and to do the work. Examples of this relationship between language and labour market integration can be traced in the personal stories of the respondents. P5 *"I don't want and don't need to learn the Slovak language because I'm waiting to go back to Ukraine."* P1 mentioned the situation: "*A situation happened to me when I signed an employment contract. I just signed it because I needed a job, but I didn't understand the words. And then I found out that if it was a 40-hour week, everything I did in addition to that I wasn't paid*."

3.2 Bureaucratic barriers

The second most common barrier for participants is the country's bureaucracy. Filling out all the necessary documents, communication is conducted in a language that is completely foreign to the migrant. The experience of participants in Slovakia is characterised by long waiting times, confusion of information, issuing of expired permits, endless queues, prosecution of "blocked" applications and loss of documents.

Participants described misunderstandings, complicated application processes, and the bureaucratic process of setting up a business. P2: *"The whole process is incomprehensible for us Ukrainians and I received different answers from different offices, it was very confusing. Yes, there are assistance centres in Slovakia that are supposed to help in the process of dealing with all the necessary documents."* As participant P2 mentioned in the interview, in the larger cities in Slovakia (Bratislava, Banska Bystrica, Košice), assistance centres were established as a result of the cooperation of the municipality, state institutions, NGOs, a private company that provided the premises, as well as other private companies that contributed financially. Thus, under one roof, the refugees from Ukraine had the opportunity to get the necessary information and assistance in dealing with official matters, apply for temporary shelter, and arrange for material needs benefits or accommodation through volunteer assistance. This possibility was perceived very positively by the interview participants and as a help with bureaucratic obstacles. Also, participant P8 confirmed that NGOs and Charity were involved in helping people from Ukraine "*For example, charity and volunteers from NGOs helped us with clothing, I took Slovak courses, deal with papers when necessary and I also know that they do various workshops and leisure activities for children, which is great*."

Participant 8 mentioned: "*Because if we were Slovak, we can get it done in two or three days, but since we are Ukrainian it takes much longer, and many more documents are needed. But the biggest problem is that there is no cooperation. You will not find any*

help at all. For example, my personal experience. I've been to the foreign police three times and three times I got different info. Someone is more like you need both this and that, and someone will say they do not need half of it. Who's to know then."

Participants reported that they were insufficiently informed about various bureaucratic processes in Slovakia. As participant 10 said: "*I'm a hairdresser and I wanted to open my own salon, but it's a very difficult process. However, the system has to be so simplified for those people who came after the war and want to get a job or do something and do not even understand how and do not know how to pay for it themselves and do not know how to arrange it themselves*."

We can conclude that bureaucracy is one of the biggest problems that foreigners face. In the state sphere in particular, administration as such is one of the biggest difficulties. Participants often referred to it as a complex bureaucracy where the foreigner would rather give up the process than continue to endure it. Similarly, on the private side, this problem was also mentioned most frequently. P2: "*It's terribly complicated, high bureaucracy, I'd rather give up than deal with the bureaucracy*."

3.3 Lack of job opportunities

As mentioned above, the participants first looked for a job in their field, but then found that there were not many opportunities in Slovakia that matched their previous experience and education. Furthermore, they emphasised that no one here needs their university degree or their experience, even if one has work experience. P3: "*My profession does not suit me here at all, I used to work as an accountant and it's very hard to retrain.*"

Newly arrived refugees often find jobs requiring little education, regardless of the education they received in their home country. At the same time, migrants tend to be more overeducated than natives working in comparable positions [21, 22]. Although the mismatch between education and occupation is relatively persistent [23, 24], refugees have been able to move gradually into jobs that match their qualifications [24–26], as documented by participant P1's statement: *"It was really hard at first and I had few job opportunities to choose from. Now I earn about 800 euros net in Slovakia. For the first few months I cleaned hotel rooms, but gradually I got to lead a small team of female workers who run what I used to do back home in Ukraine"*. The integration of refugees into the labour market has thus a U-shape, characterised by an initial decline in work status relative to the last job before migration and a subsequent increase in work status in the host country. Since occupation is closely related to income, migrants' incomes also tend to be lower compared to the native population [27]. Although the income gap widens over time at least partially closes, the catch-up rate itself depends on educational attainment, with incomes of the native population most rapidly caught up by low-skilled immigrants [27].

Participants in the interviews agreed with the statement that, in their opinion, there a lack of job opportunities in Slovakia, and there are few job opportunities in what they have studied. They mentioned problems with the recognition of qualifications and education. P9: "*They told us that diplomas are recognised in Slovakia, they will recognise a person's degree before their name, but in order to go to work in the field in which they have a degree, they have to be ranked and registered in a certain chamber of professionals. My sister, a veterinarian from Ukraine, came here and she had many years of practice at home. They recognised her diploma, they added her degree to her documents, but the chamber of veterinarians did not recognise her education, so she could not continue her work in Slovakia*."

3.4 Experience of discrimination

In interviews with Slovaks, the refugees spoke in a positive way. But even though most had only positive experiences, stories were also told in which refugees had faced discrimination. Discrimination is still part of any integration. Discrimination can also be encountered when looking for a job, in pay differentials between women and men, or in age discrimination. It can affect every sphere of a person's life. Discrimination is a form of distortion of equality. Discrimination against persons is therefore inevitably oriented towards them and on the basis of their belonging to a certain type of social group. However, it is also necessary that discriminatory action causes some disadvantage, harm or injustice to the persons against whom it is directed [28]. Participants described the following personal experiences. P3 states: "*I've been in a situation where the beginnings were difficult, and I would take any job. First the company promised me that they would employ me, that I had a good education, I waited for about three weeks and then they told me they would not employ me, I do not know the reason of course, just that they did not need anybody anymore. I think it's because I'm from Ukraine and they chose someone else, but I found that out later. I was sorry because I had been waiting three weeks for this job.*"

Personal experience with discrimination in the workplace is also documented by the statement of participant 1: "*I cleaned the house for three months. They paid me for it, and I finally found out that because I was from Ukraine and they could probably afford it, I was paid less per hour than my colleague from Slovakia, but I had a nicer job than the Slovak one*".

The overall situation regarding the experience of discrimination was assessed by P10: "*It changed the situation overall, they started to perceive us in a different way, because before there was probably not such a large group of Ukrainians in Slovakia. Some of them are very nice, but even so, the people I know from Ukraine mostly do not do what they used to do in Ukraine, they just give us menial jobs. We also have good experiences with people who wanted to help us but also those who tell us that we are stealing their jobs in Slovakia. In my opinion, many employers realise that we are in need and that is why we will do any job for little money.*"

Based on the information above, we can conclude that Ukrainians face more barriers to labour market integration and one of them is the experience of discrimination in the labour market. Several studies have looked at the prevalence of prejudice against refugees. According to an Esses study [29], prejudice and bias against refugees are common and can lead to discriminatory actions. Similarly, Fazel et al. [30], found that discrimination against refugees is common in the areas of work, housing and health care. Refugees have to leave their country and move to a new country in order to have better opportunities and survive. In the case of the war between Russia and Ukraine, Ukrainian refugees have migrated to nearby countries such as Poland, Slovakia, Romania, the Czech Republic, Germany, the United Kingdom and many others. Once refugees arrive in a new country, they often have less human capital that is locally usable. As a result, they are likely to start at a much lower level of wages and employability. The integration of refugees is likely to present significant difficulties [31]. According to Courtney Brell [31] study employment rates for refugees have been found to be relatively low at the beginning of their arrival in a new country, but often increase quite rapidly over time in the first few years after migration.

As the above has shown, when refugees leave their country of origin and seek asylum in another country, they encounter a range of difficulties and obstacles, both emotional and practical. Government, international agencies, and civil society must

work together to develop a coordinated and comprehensive strategy to address these challenges. In addition to promoting social inclusion and combating discrimination, this includes ensuring access to legal aid, basic needs and services, mental health assistance, education and economic opportunities, and here we see a major role and assistance of NGOs.

4. Role of NGOs in overcoming the job challenges

There are many NGOs in Slovakia that, immediately after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, mobilised and started helping refugees in various forms: food, clothing, housing, translation and interpreting [32, 33]. In this part, we show several examples of NGOs that are mainly active in overcoming the barriers identified in the interviews.

Slovak Catholic Charity [34] operates a network of support centres for leavers and refugees from Ukraine in Slovakia. They are visited by people in difficult and complicated situations, and they are primarily vulnerable groups of leavers such as mothers with children, seniors, the disabled and others who cannot find work. Therefore, humanitarian aid is an essential part of their care. They support refugees and all people in need to integrate into society and help them become independent. Each support centre creates its own network of activities that tries to integrate leavers and refugees into society. Slovak Catholic Charity joined the Emergency Appeal project, which responds to unexpected circumstances and disasters in the world. Through the project, they have opened and operated 24 support centres across Slovakia. The aim is to provide humanitarian aid, counselling, language and vocational courses, psychological assistance, as well as workshops and leisure activities for Ukrainian refugees. As such, this NGO helps with the first barrier discussed – lack of knowledge of the Slovak language.

The next job challenges are connected with bureaucracy and discrimination. Examples of NGOs can be so-called Help Centres [35], which were established in the cities of Košice, Michalovce and Bratislava. Refugees are helped to overcome the barriers associated with bureaucracy and find employment. Activities of Help Centres are ensured by organisations Mareena and the League for Human Rights. Mareena [36] is a civic association that has been dedicated to the integration of refugees and other foreigners into Slovak society since 2017. Their vision is Slovakia, which is a safe and dignified home for everyone, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity or religion. The League for Human Rights [37] is a Slovak non-governmental organisation that has been providing free legal assistance and information to foreigners and refugees in Slovakia since 2005. Thanks to the Help Centres, refugees can obtain information about moving to and staying in Slovakia, assistance in finding accommodation and employment, help with registration for financial support for vulnerable persons, and psychological help as needed. There is also the BLUE DOT service, which provides facilities for mothers with children and young people during the day. They also provide temporary accommodation and food for Ukrainians and their relatives in heated container rooms that are open 24/7.

In Slovakia, there is also The Red Cross organisation, which has established branches in 34 municipalities in Slovakia with first contact offices, which mainly provide basic social counselling, help in finding suitable accommodation, access to health care, help with placing children in school and preschool facilities, help when looking for a job, information about state assistance programmes and referrals

to other aid organisations, assistance programmes and programmes for restoring families (Restoring Family Links), psychological first aid and referrals in the field of mental health and psychosocial support, recommendations for organisations and aid providers that the Slovak Red Cross does not deal with, material humanitarian aid and recommendations for legal aid [38].

Furthermore, there are various local organisations, such as ConnecTT – a support centre for foreigners arriving and living in Trnava, which, in addition to job mediation, also helps them in the field of education and information provision [39].

The city of Bratislava established the Bottova Assistance Center [40], which, in addition to job mediation, also provides assistance services, language courses, a community centre, material assistance, leisure activities, education and carelessness will heal.

The organisation TENENET Blue Dot Bratislava, in addition to providing employment, also focuses on financial counselling, providing information, psychological help, services for seniors, women and children, social care, accompaniment, leisure activities and caregiving [41].

The International Organisation for Migration [42] has eight branches in all regional cities in Slovakia. In addition to job mediation, it also provides refugees with assistance services, financial assistance, legal advice, social care, travel assistance, education, and language courses.

5. Concluding remarks

NGOs and activists in Slovakia have long been working on the issue of refugee assistance, but the attitudes of the general public towards refugees have changed in recent years. The so-called refugee crisis of 2015, which was largely the result of the war in Syria that has been ongoing since 2011, has caused many Slovaks to fear the arrival of refugees and have concerns for their own safety. After the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, there has been a large wave of solidarity in Slovakia. Attitudes of the general public towards refugees arriving from Ukraine were significantly more positive at the start of the conflict compared with previous refugee crises [43].

As Duce [32] pointed out, there is much more to helping the refugees than material assistance and accommodation. Supporting refugees has fallen on housing and homelessness organisations that are already struggling in the face of a regional housing crisis and lack of affordable social housing. The author discusses the implications of this and shares experiences from frontline organisations that have been forced to offer a full range of social services to refugees and respond to the crisis in real time. Among such services are also those presented in this chapter that help to overcome barriers to labour integration. The analysis identified four overarching themes: (1) language barrier, (2) bureaucratic barriers, (3) lack of job opportunities, and (4) experience of discrimination. There are quite few NGOs in Slovakia that play a vital role in assisting the refugees and leavers with these issues by humanitarian aid, (financial) counselling, providing information, language and vocational courses, psychological assistance, as well as workshops and leisure activities and many more.

Since this chapter is based on qualitative research, it is not possible to generalise the results for Slovakia. Future research could focus on "numbers", apply qualitative methods and explore the Slovak context of labour market integration for refugees using mathematical and statistical methods. Another research venue opens for

an international comparative study, including neighbouring countries such as V4 (Poland, Hungary, and Czechia). Furthermore, considering that many refugees are staying in Slovakia permanently, the housing issue needs to be taken care of. Here, it would be interesting to map the living preferences of Ukrainians. Previous research [44] has revealed that roughly 1000 Slovak students prefer "traditional" living in a smaller community. That is home ownership, a suburban environment rather than big city life. On the other hand, it is evident from a sample of approximately 100 foreign students who have arrived in recent years mainly from Ukraine, but also from Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, that they prefer the cosmopolitan life of big cities. This issue is subject of a research project "Application of behavioural economics in the mapping of preferences in the areas of housing, employment and transport mobility," which is creating a methodology to map also the living and working arrangements and as such it can be applied to the Ukrainian refugee crises as well.

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Chapter 3

The Role of the Non-Governmental Organisations and Volunteers in Organising Support for Ukrainian Refugees: The Case Study from Slovakia

Alžbeta Brozmanová Gregorová, Filip Bambúch and Jana Šolcová

Abstract

This chapter examines the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and volunteers in organising support for Ukrainian refugees, focusing on a case study from Slovakia. Since the onset of unprovoked Russian aggression, more than 13 million individuals have fled Ukraine, leading to a massive refugee crisis. Civil society, including NGOs, volunteers and active citizens, played a crucial role in Slovakia. The study analyses the structure of the support system for people arriving from Ukraine to Slovakia, focusing on spontaneous assistance, adaptation and integration stages. It also explores the involvement of NGOs in communication with the government and data from representative research on volunteer engagement in the Ukrainian refugee crisis. These analyses demonstrate that NGOs and volunteers played a pivotal role in responding to the crisis, providing humanitarian aid and supporting the integration of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia. The chapter also emphasises the importance of a sustainable financial environment for NGOs and the need for a more systematic response from public authorities to support refugees.

Keywords: non-governmental organisations, volunteers, Ukrainian refugees, integration, crisis

1. Introduction

Since the commencement of the unprovoked Russian aggression, more than 13 million individuals have fled Ukraine. Approximately 6.3 million are officially recognised as refugees, while another 5.9 million benefit from temporary protection or similar national safeguard programmes in various European countries [1]. In Slovakia, the crucial role in the first stages of the war and later in the Ukrainian refugee integration was played by civil society—its formal part consisted of non-governmental

organisations, and the informal part consisted of volunteers, active citizens and informal groups. Also, Ukrainians living in Slovakia before the war had an essential role. The civil society filled the gap in the crisis and migration management systems and influenced the national policy and strategies in several cases. The chapter contains an analysis of the structure of the support system for people coming from Ukraine to Slovakia, focusing on the scope of actions taken by the non-governmental organisations and volunteers. The chapter reflects the stage of spontaneous assistance, the adaptation stage and the integration stage. It also analyses the involvement of NGOs in communication with the government and data from representative research about the involvement of volunteers in the Ukrainian refugee crisis.

2. Specifics of the Ukrainian crisis in the Slovakian context

While the refugee crisis triggered by the war in Ukraine is not the inaugural instance in EU countries, its nature sets it apart. In the case of Slovakia, this crisis represents its first encounter with a natural refugee crisis. The distinct characteristics of the Ukrainian refugee crisis stem from several factors elucidated by Bird and Amaglobeli [2], Garcés Mascareñas [3] and OECD [4]. Firstly, the departure's size, speed and proximity mark a significant departure, distinguishing it from distant conflicts. Secondly, cultural and social proximity plays a pivotal role, evident in the atypical profile of arrivals, primarily highly skilled women with children and a notable proportion with tertiary education. Thirdly, recent migration history, including prior Ukrainian worker migration to the EU and visa-free travel since 2017, has fostered strong Ukrainian social networks across Europe, particularly in bordering countries like Slovakia. These networks proved invaluable during the initial spontaneous response to the war and subsequent months of local-level refugee support—Slovakia's adoption of an open border policy also marks a significant departure this time. EU member states have decided to enforce the long-unused Temporary Protection Directive, allowing collective temporary protection without individual asylum assessments. This streamlines immediate access to protection and a wide array of rights, encompassing work, education and healthcare. Furthermore, the Directive permits the territorial distribution of refugees, considering not only member states' reception preferences but also the refugees' desires. Additionally, there is a widespread expectation that Ukrainians fleeing the war will eventually return post-conflict.

Moreover, the response in recipient countries like Slovakia has been unprecedented. The crisis has elicited remarkable political and public support, triggering an extraordinary mobilisation of institutions, organisations and individuals within host communities, surpassing familial and friendship networks. Instances of volunteers assisting at borders, information points and train stations and offering transportation or accommodation underscore this exceptional solidarity, a phenomenon hitherto unseen in Slovakia.

Before the Ukrainian refugee crisis, Slovakia lacked experience in hosting large-scale war and humanitarian refugees compared to other European countries and was not a traditional destination country for migrants. It is a culturally homogeneous country, untouched by the dramatic increase in migration during the twentieth century. Until recently, Slovakia was almost exclusively a country of origin of migrants, that is, a country from which citizens migrated abroad for various reasons. Even though the growth in the population of foreigners in Slovakia was the second highest among all EU Member States between 2004 and 2008, the

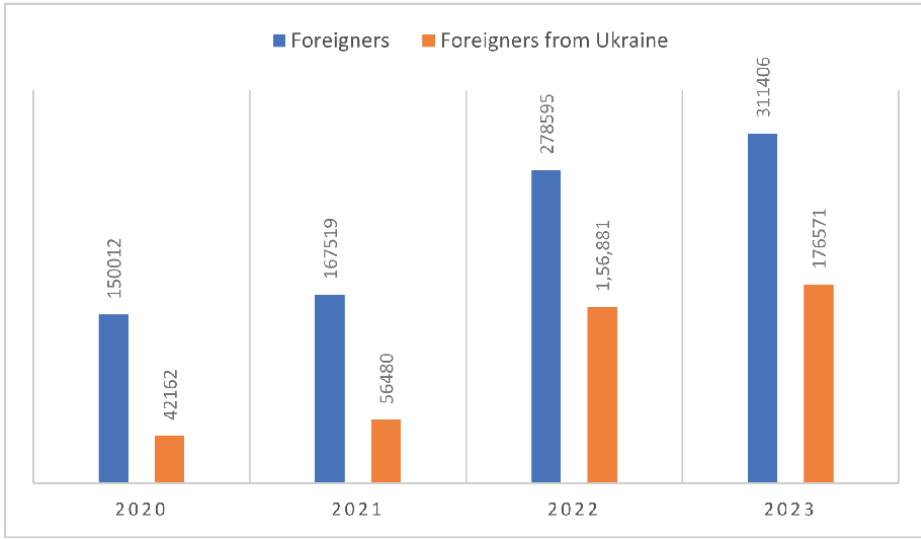

Figure 1.
Foreigners and foreigners from Ukraine in Slovakia since 2020. Source: [5].

representation of foreigners in the population remains low compared to other EU countries. The population development of foreigners in Slovakia from 2020 until 2023 is presented in **Figure 1**.

In December 2020, the number of foreigners with a residence permit in Slovakia was 150,012. Their share in the population of Slovakia was 2.75%. In 2021, this number was 167,519, with a share in the population of 3.08%; in 2022, it was already 278,595 foreigners, which accounted for 5.13% of the population of Slovakia. In 2023, it was 311,406 people. This represented a 5.74% share of the total population of Slovakia. Of the number of foreigners granted residency, a significant majority were citizens of Ukraine. For example, in 2023, they accounted for 56.69% [5]. Before the influx of Ukrainian refugees, Slovakia had also never encountered such many foreigners who did not speak their native language and was known for its long-standing, hard-line policies against receiving migrants and refugees. Between 2010 and 2023, 5203 asylum applications were submitted in Slovakia, of which 406 were granted asylum, and 650 were granted subsidiary protection as an additional form of international protection [6]. In 2020, alongside Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, Slovakia opposed a Commission plan to distribute asylum seekers across EU member states and criticised proposals for overhauling the European Union's flawed migration and asylum rules. However, as Mesežnikov [7] highlighted, Slovakia's approach to the war in Ukraine differed significantly. Slovakia unequivocally supported Ukraine in the conflict, offering comprehensive assistance, including military aid, vehemently condemning Russian aggression and taking a proactive stance against the standard EU policy. The situation remains uncertain; it is unclear what will be declared and implemented by the Slovakian government regarding the support to Ukraine, given the potential shift towards a more pro-Russia direction following the 2023 elections.

Slovakia shares approximately 730 kilometres of border with Ukraine, which has witnessed the passage of over 2.29 million Ukrainian refugees since February 2022. While the majority continued westward, the number remaining in Slovakia remains relatively high, notably surpassing the local average of migrants from the previous

year. By the end of December 2023, Eurostat [8] reported 114,225 refugees from Ukraine registered with temporary protection in Slovakia. Even those who eventually journeyed westward still required vital assistance during their initial hours or days, including provisions such as food, water, healthcare, basic shelter or transportation.

The crucial role during the early stages of the war and later in the integration process of Ukrainian refugees was played by civil society. This included formal actors such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and informal participants such as volunteers, active citizens and informal groups. Additionally, pre-war Ukrainian residents in Slovakia played an essential role. Slovakian civil society filled critical gaps in crisis and migration management systems and influenced national policies and strategies.

The chapter is prepared based on the analysis of the literature and existing reports in the field and the experiences of authors from the field. The analysis of the volunteer involvement during the crisis is based on the selected results of the research 'Volunteering in Time of Crisis in Slovakia'. The research coordinator is the co-author of the chapter. The survey was carried out using the method of personal inquiry recorded in an electronic device (CAPI). The selection was carried out using the quota sampling method, with sex, age, education, nationality, size of the place of residence and region of residence as the quota characteristics. The collection took place from 31 October to 8 November 2023. Data was collected on 1020 Slovak residents aged 18 and older (48% male, 52% female; age groups: 18–24 years 9%, 25–34 years 17%, 35–44 years 20%, 45–54 years 18%, 55–64 years 16%, 65 and more 21%).

2.1 Non-governmental organisations' contribution to organising support for Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia

The NGO sector in Slovakia, considered 'modern', is relatively nascent, experiencing a resurgence after the dissolution of socialism in 1989. However, the country boasts a rich history of non-governmental and volunteer activities dating back to the twelfth century. Throughout the twentieth century, Slovakia underwent numerous regime changes, enduring eight currency reforms and nine constitutions, navigating through various political systems, including parliamentary democracy, fascism, Stalinism, 'normalisation', socialism and the post-communist return to democracy. Despite this tumultuous history, NGOs flourished in Slovakia [9]. Presently, there is a discernible shift in the perception of the NGO sector, transitioning from its institutionalised form to a landscape characterised by a multitude of non-institutional and informal initiatives and processes [10–12]. These initiatives undergo rapid changes, disappearances and emergences over time. Slovakia is home to approximately 60,000 registered NGOs; however, based on research in 2019 [13], only one-third are active, operating across various domains such as public health, social services, sports, culture, education, welfare and the environment. One of the essential fields of the NGO sector is working with migrants and in humanitarian help. However, before the Ukrainian crisis, only several organisations were active in this area [13].

NGOs are indispensable partners in governance during crises, often assuming roles as first responders and service providers. According to Sandberg [14], traditional theories regarding the non-profit sector suggest that NGOs emerge in response to the absence of necessary social welfare and support typically not provided by public or private institutions during non-crisis periods. During refugee crises, NGOs serve as frontline responders due to their capacity for swift and reactive action, offering humanitarian aid and social support and advocating for refugees in the public sphere [15]. They

play a pivotal role in managing refugee protection by bridging the gap that commonly exists between normative frameworks for refugee protection and the unwillingness or inability of state authorities to fulfil their corresponding obligations. Various civil society networks, ranging from loosely organised social movements to established NGOs dedicated to refugee protection, are prevalent in this context. The research underscores the ambiguous role and function of NGOs in refugee protection. While NGOs undoubtedly contribute to refugee protection efforts, they also grapple with concerns about potential exploitation and being burdened with tasks that ideally should be undertaken by public authorities and state agencies. Moreover, research highlights diverse characteristics and arrangements within organised civil society engagement [16].

Examining the scale of help and support for refugees from Ukraine from NGOs and volunteers in Slovakia, it is also essential to reflect on the stage and degree of advancement of the ongoing refugee crisis and expectations concerning when the conflict will end. The needs, their scale and how they are met, and provided support and activities of NGOs vary at different stages. The information below reflects the stage of spontaneous assistance and, in part, the adaptation stage, which, depending on how the situation on the frontline develops and whether the refugees from Ukraine stay in Slovakia, is gradually turning into the integration stage.

2.2 Support of NGOs in the first stages of the Ukrainian crisis

The spontaneous aid stage after the war in Ukraine started in February 2022 was dominated in Slovakia by grassroots initiatives, an unprecedented, rapid social effort on a massive scale and ad hoc support for these processes from local governments and the central authorities. Managing the beginning of the refugee crisis in Slovakia took immense effort; it was speedy, flexible and based on cooperation among non-profit sectors, volunteers and governmental structures.

During the initial phase of the crisis, the primary focus was on supplying clothing, food and hygiene products and funding immediate expenses, alongside crucial logistics such as transporting refugees from border areas to towns within Slovakia or beyond. Providing accommodation for thousands of refugees emerged as one of the most daunting challenges. Additionally, refugees required basic information about their rights and available options, often necessitating psychological support during the crisis. Over time, the needs of Ukrainian refugees opting to remain in Slovakia underwent evolution.

Mishchuk and Vlasenko [17] underscored the critical role of NGOs in complementing government support for Ukrainian refugees and, in instances where governmental efforts were lacking, substituting them altogether. As primary service providers, NGOs acted as frontline responders during the Ukrainian migration crisis in Slovakia. In the initial days and weeks following the outbreak of the Russian invasion, NGOs in Slovakia swiftly mobilised to aid refugees both at the borders and within local communities, outpacing the central government's response. Their pragmatic approach and extensive networks facilitated rapid and efficient provision of immediate assistance to those affected. Moreover, NGOs in Slovakia possessed valuable expertise in working with refugees and managing crises, cultivated through partnerships with international organisations.

As Bryan et al. [18] concluded, NGOs play a crucial role in collaborating, mobilising supporters and offering direct financial and material assistance in response to refugee crises. The adaptability and agility of NGOs are attributed to their flexible management structures, the absence of bureaucratic hurdles and their commitment

to core values. The dedication of NGO personnel fosters a willingness to work tirelessly and selflessly, driven by pro-social values, even without adequate resources and tangible rewards. While NGO workers may demonstrate a readiness to extend beyond their comfort zones to aid forced migrants during crises, a sustainable governance framework cannot rely solely on such efforts in the long run.

NGOs in Slovakia engaged not only in providing humanitarian aid at border points, information centres and local communities but also in facilitating housing, language education, employment services and various forms of psychological and social support for Ukrainian refugees, aiding in their adaptation and integration into host societies. Many NGOs also focused on fostering social cohesion, directing their efforts towards Ukrainian refugees and the host community. Notably, several pivotal NGOs were established by Ukrainians already residing in Slovakia or by refugees from Ukraine themselves.

As Baszczak et al. [19] indicated, the adaptation phase witnessed an increase in the state's involvement and a corresponding decrease in the role of civil society. During this stage, refugees are integrated into the state and welfare systems, accessing essential services within the existing public policy framework. Given that a significant portion of Ukrainian refugees comprise women, children and the elderly, their primary needs at this juncture include access to healthcare, education and legal employment opportunities. Consequently, the second phase of assistance necessitates additional resources, institutional support and considerably higher financial investments, which must be provided systematically, continuously and continuously monitored. NGOs in Slovakia remained active during this stage, enabled by support from the EU and major international organisations such as UNICEF, UNHCR and MIOM, to offer more comprehensive services to aid in the adaptation process for Ukrainian refugees.

An essential stride during this period involved the adaptation of strategic documents addressing the impact of the conflict in Ukraine. These documents were developed in Slovakia through close collaboration between the state, local governments and NGOs. As underscored by several NGOs, the refugee influx from Ukraine marked a new phase of cooperation between NGOs and the state in Slovakia. Although Slovakia had an existing strategy for integrating foreigners on its territory (the Migration Policy of the Slovak Republic with a view to 2025), the government of Slovakia formulated an Action Plan for Managed Integration, developed in cooperation with public administration bodies, municipalities and NGOs. The Action Plan encompasses 12 key integration areas, defining 36 tasks for state and local authorities while also leveraging the capacities and expertise of non-governmental organisations. These tasks encompass coordination, data collection and evaluation, public and migrant communication, housing, education, employment, healthcare, mental health support, legislation, community and social work, access to justice and cultural integration. In October 2022, the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic approved a comprehensive Contingency Plan for the period October 2022–March 2023 to address the emergency arising from the mass arrival of Ukrainian refugees. Furthermore, the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic entered into a Memorandum of Cooperation with 11 NGOs actively engaged in the refugee crisis, outlining a coordinated approach between the state and the NGO sector in response to potential escalations in the influx of refugees fleeing the military conflict in Ukraine.

Two years following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Slovakia is currently navigating the integration phase of its refugee crisis. During this period, stakeholders across various levels are collaboratively devising strategies to facilitate the permanent and effective inclusion of refugees into society. This involves fostering seamless

integration within schools, public institutions, the labour market and other spheres while also mitigating tensions between host communities and Ukrainian refugees. The overarching objective of this phase is to cultivate a cohesive society where individuals from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds amalgamate into a unified entity, underpinned by equality.

Community work emerges as a pivotal instrument for integration, historically evolving in response to the repercussions of migration. Its primary aim is to nurture and fortify the collective fabric of communities. Central to community work is the promotion of empowerment and motivation within existing communities or the construction of nascent ones. Community work focusing on interconnection and cooperation between communities can help achieve social inclusion and reduce stereotypes and prejudices. Such community work is essential not only for minority communities but also for the majority community, as it contributes to diversity, tolerance and social cohesion in society. Cooperation and understanding between communities can lead to mutual benefits and harmonious coexistence [20].

The lion's share of services facilitating the integration of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia is orchestrated by NGOs with extensive experience in community work with refugees and other marginalised groups. Additionally, informal groups of proactive individuals, spurred by the conflict in Ukraine, and composed of foreign community members or organisations primarily uniting Ukrainian citizens, play a significant role in integration efforts. To bolster integration, NGOs in Slovakia collaborate with relevant stakeholders to organise cultural exchanges, intercultural workshops and training sessions; establish safe and inclusive spaces; coordinate collective community endeavours; implement mentoring programs; encourage participation in volunteer initiatives and deliver services for disadvantaged groups of Ukrainian refugees.

Since in Slovakia, there were no stable conditions for the functioning of NGOs and their financial sustainability, it was necessary to set up a system of systematic financial support for organisations at the national and local level that provide these services, whether they are organisations that have been providing these services for a long time or emerging initiatives that come from active citizens or foreigners, in order to sustain these activities. The recommendations summarised in the policy paper 'Proposals for Solutions' [21] as a result of the cooperation of organisations with long-standing experience and know-how in the area of the integration of foreigners and the provision of humanitarian aid stated that when setting the financial-administrative framework, it is vital to support communities in their functioning, self-realisation and development—for example, through various support schemes aimed at the establishment of community integration centres and the creation of projects and events, artistic collaborations, capacity building and awareness raising.

Thanks to the active involvement of the cooperation of the Ministry of Interiors Slovak Republic, the Office for Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development and representatives of NGOs established the EU CARE in 2022. The program was created as a response of the state and independent foundations to the crisis situation after the outbreak of Russian war aggression in Ukraine and represented a unique model of cooperation between the state and the non-governmental sector, which provided a significant amount of funding for humanitarian and integration activities. In addition, it set a major precedent—an independent consortium of 6 foundations redistributed European money from Slovak public funds for the first time in history. The Open Society Foundation Bratislava, as the leader of the consortium, together with five other foundations, redistributed more than EUR 9.5 million in 2023 to NGOs assisting refugees from Ukraine. Within the national EU CARE project

(Assistance to persons from Ukraine in their entry and integration in the territory of the Slovak Republic—NGOs), 110 organisations have received financial support. The financial aid form included more than just a contribution to the performance of professional and assistance activities. Organisations that involved volunteers in their activities could also apply for a flat-rate contribution for their coordination as partial compensation for the costs incurred by the organisations in assisting. On 14 December 2023, a new plan for the national project 'Integration of third-country nationals, including migrants' was approved, which should continuously build on the activities of the EU CARE project. This national project should be implemented between 2024 and 2026 under the leadership of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family in partnership with the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development [22].

2.3 Role of volunteers in response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis

Aid for sudden events such as the refugee crisis often emerges spontaneously, disorganised and involving creativity. In the initial phase, aid was spontaneous and very little organised [19]. On 25 February, volunteers started to bring the first supplies of water, food and clothing to the border crossings, but they also started to set up tents, which was inevitable given the time of year [23]. In addition to humanitarian aid, money was also collected. These often served as pocket money for refugees who continued westward [24]. Slovakia has also had to focus much more on internal transport and the movement of refugees, not only on the transfer of refugees within the country but also on their transfer outside Slovakia [25]. An essential element, although very limited, was mainly the provision of at least basic information by volunteers. The information concerned how and where they could travel, whether any accommodation was possible and so forth. Over time, with the addition of legislation, accommodation and other options, the information started to become more comprehensive. Also, many volunteers were Ukrainians who had voluntarily immigrated before the war and provided essential information and support. Volunteers could join NGOs or municipalities that operated on borders or at the local level.

According to a representative survey conducted as part of the Volunteering in Slovakia in Times of Crisis 2023 project, 20.7% of respondents over 18 have volunteered to help resolve the crisis in Ukraine. Most volunteers have been involved in informal volunteering activities without being mediated or managed by an organisation. Of the people volunteering to help resolve the crisis in Ukraine, 40.3% were engaged in informal volunteering, 28.4% were volunteering within organisations and 31.3% were carrying out formal and informal volunteering activities.

Table 1 provides an overview of the time volunteers were involved in helping.

In the first four weeks, 61.1% of volunteers were involved in the crisis caused by the war in Ukraine. Within three months, 90.5% of them were involved, so it is clear that this is a response to a crisis. According to the research conducted in Slovakia in recent years on people's involvement in volunteering activities, approximately one-third of the population has been involved in volunteering. According to research results in 2019, 36% of the adult population has engaged in formal volunteering, and 55% has been involved in informal volunteering in the last 12 months [13]. In 2023, according to the research Volunteering in Slovakia in Times of Crisis, 34.2% of the adult population was involved in formal and 52.7% in informal volunteering. Although the percentage of people involved in volunteering for the resolution of the

Involvement over time	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Immediately after the outbreak of war, within two weeks	35.5	35.5
After 3 weeks after the war started	25.6	61.1
After more than a month	19.4	80.6
After more than 2 months	10.0	90.5
More than 3 months after the outbreak of the war	9.5	100.0

Table 1.
Involving volunteers in helping to resolve the crisis in Ukraine.

crisis in Ukraine is lower than the overall percentage of people involved in volunteering activities, since the surveys always track involvement over a more extended period (12 months) and in the case of the crisis, it is involvement in a short time and for a specific purpose, the data shows an actual increase in solidarity in the form of volunteering [13].

In addition to volunteering activities, people in Slovakia have also engaged in other forms of assistance in favour of the resolution of the Ukraine crisis. 36.5% of respondents to the Volunteering in Slovakia during the crisis survey declared that they made a financial or material donation in favour of the resolution of the Ukraine crisis, 2.2% provided premises or accommodation, 28.4% made a material donation and 14.2% made a financial donation.

As an example of grassroots assistance and NGOs in the 1 year since the outbreak of war in Ukraine, we present data from a report prepared by the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Civil Society Development in Slovakia based on data collection from 160 NGOs. During the monitoring period February 2022 - February 2023, the following can be noted:

- the volume of financial collections in total amounted to 17.070.460 Euro;
- the volume of humanitarian aid totalled 13,782.71 tonnes;
- number of man-hours of volunteer work: 497,599 man-hours;
- man-hours of integration activities: 676,925 man-hours;
- Approximate total value of the work done by volunteers and integration experts: € 4,357,484.04 (calculated using the minimum wage coefficient of 3.71 Euro);
- Number of volunteers involved through NGOs by month: year 2022: February to April: 6944, May: 4380, June: 1284, July: 1053, August: 1015, September: 683, October: 634, November: 645 and December: 586. Year 2023: January: 682, February: 688 [26].

The support of volunteers continues in the integration phase of refugees. However, their involvement is more through the organisations and more managed, and volunteers are involved in various support programmes focused on integration.

3. Discussion and conclusion

The situation in the V4 countries, culturally close to Slovakia, was similar to Slovakia's, but there were also some differences. The spontaneous aid stage was dominated in all V4 countries (Slovakia, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic) by grassroots initiatives, an unprecedented, rapid social effort on a massive scale, and ad hoc support for these processes from local governments and central authorities. As stated by Mishchuk and Vlasenko in analyses dedicated to V4 countries, NGOs have proven to be critically important in supplementing government support to refugees from Ukraine (in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia) or even substituting government efforts where the government has not been proactive (in Hungary) [17]. Despite the significant contribution of NGOs to the response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis and integration efforts, many organisations in V4 countries encountered numerous challenges. As highlighted in Kiss's report [27], NGOs in Poland expressed concerns about volunteers feeling overwhelmed. The transition from volunteers to a professional workforce posed challenges, and all stakeholders struggled to scale up operations due to funding constraints, recruitment difficulties and organisational capacity limitations.

Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic exhibited a robust initial display of solidarity in response to the influx of refugees, with ordinary citizens volunteering at border crossings and reception centres, offering spare rooms in their homes and donating money, food and clothing to refugees like Slovakia. As noted by Byrska, the mobilisation of Polish society and Ukrainians residing in Poland before the war played a crucial role in supporting war refugees from Ukraine [28]. According to the Polish Economic Institute, within the first 3 months following the onset of full-scale war, 77% of adult Poles engaged in aiding war refugees. Their contributions ranged from monetary donations, clothing and food to informal or formal volunteering, providing accommodation, assisting refugees in finding employment or organising transportation from the border [19].

NGOs in Slovakia played a pivotal role in responding to the immediate crisis triggered by the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, and their subsequent efforts in aiding refugees from Ukraine have been indispensable. However, this response has entailed significant changes for many NGOs. The infusion of financial resources into projects has substantially expanded their staff capacities, requiring sustained financial support for long-term viability. Even before the outbreak of the Ukraine war, NGOs in Slovakia grappled with financial instability and sustainability. Consequently, ensuring a stable financial environment is paramount if these organisations remain committed to supporting the integration of Ukrainian refugees.

Bryan et al. posit that the resilience strategies employed by NGOs during the Ukrainian crisis represent short-term fixes for systemic issues [18]. Their findings underscore the necessity for a more systematic response led by the government. Similarly, Ansell et al. contend that foresight, protection and resilience alone are insufficient in turbulent circumstances [29]. They advocate for robust strategies within the public sector, wherein adaptable and innovative public organisations forge networks and partnerships with the private sector and civil society to address emergent disruptive challenges.

As the analysis declares, the crisis associated with the war in Ukraine brought new challenges and opportunities for NGOs in Slovakia. Relationship building with the government proved to be mutually beneficial. On the other hand, the question remains about the future of these relations and cooperation with the government,

which declares its negative attitude and often aggressive posture towards NGOs, which, even in times of crisis, play not only the role of service providers and community development but also an advocacy role in the direction of promoting people's rights or effective public policies.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Section 2

NGOs: Democracy, Polarization and Resilience

Chapter 4

Harbinger of Democracies? The Role of NGOs in Driving Democracy in Africa

Mehari Fisseha

Abstract

The interest between civil society groups and democracy in developing countries is not a new phenomenon. Today, as part of civil societies, NGOs are dominant in the African market, acting as 'gap fillers' as well as driving democratic efforts in these countries. By considering the multifaceted relationship between NGOs and governments in developing countries, this chapter critically discusses attempts by NGOs to drive democracy in African autocratic regimes. NGOs are alleged to be 'compradors' and drive democracy through moral rehabilitation of imperialist regimes. NGOs are active parties used by international observers in ensuring credible elections. However, some scholars have argued that NGO are active 're-colonizers' in the twenty-first century as they bid the will of Western regimes to attain funding. As such, NGOs are explicated through external domination of African regimes and not necessarily driving democratization. In exploration of this topic, a mixed methods research design has been designed, underpinned by the fundamental tenets of a pragmatism philosophical position.

Keywords: civil societies, NGOs, democracy, compradors, elections, mixed methods

1. Introduction

The current discourse and architecture on NGOs as civil societies is based on different versions, leaning towards liberal democracy in the region. Kukkamaa [1] states that;

> *"...a strong and plural civil society is necessary to guard against the excesses of state power.... widen citizen participation as well as empower local communities".*

Kukkamaa [1] plots the discourse that NGOs are active institutions responsible for the vitality of political democracy. Literature in line with this assertion considers NGOs as active civil societies that regulate abuses of power and accountability to citizens. Even though NGOs are regarded as separate and autonomous spheres of operative civil societies, Dicklitch [2] contrasts this argument, especially in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa. The foundation of the latter spat is that Sub-Saharan

Africa has numerous political changes happening with limited legitimacy and distinct cultural heterogeneity. This implies nations to a hostile working environment for NGOs and as such, inadequate resources for strong and democratic functioning of a society. Although the "NGO decade" dates back to the 1990s, the growth of NGOs across Africa has not slowed, obscuring the fact that they are regarded as the "earliest forms of human organization" [3]. According to the NGO Explorer website, there are roughly 8000 NGOs in Sub-Saharan Africa. The article further points out that accumulatively, these NGOs spend roughly 8 billion pounds, which is equivalent to 10% of total UK charity spending which is projected at 79.2 billion pounds [4]. Mathews [5] also noted the mushroom growth of NGOs across Africa, majorly responding to poverty and other social issues. It was noted that there are more than 100,000 registered non-profit organizations. Focusing on Kenya, the growth has been over 400% since 1997 to 2006. Such growth could be attributed to African regimes welcoming development but at the same time, these governments tend to control them through different forms as will be discussed later in this chapter. However, other scholars opine that NGOs are harbingers of enriched panacea in democratizing African states. By reviewing these different perspectives, this chapter aims to deepen our understanding of NGOs as drivers of democratic states across Africa. Can NGOs as civil societies drive and consolidate democracy in Africa's developing nations? By looking at the current discussions of politics and NGOs, the main aim of this chapter is to discuss if NGOs can be used as harbingers of democracy across Africa. The guiding research questions are as follows;

1. As part of civil society institutions, what is the role of NGOs in driving democracy across Africa?

2. Which function/role of the NGOs in Africa is prevalent/dominant?

2. Methodology

2.1 Introduction

A research process is not "mechanistic" but a subtle, complex and deliberative procedure where a researcher investigates an occurrence in a discrete manner. Unlike a "recipe for baking a cake", researchers cannot simply 'read off' the planning and conduct a research process [6]. Either in the field of natural science or social research, research is construed to be a negotiated process with distinct "trade-offs" on what a researcher wants to achieve. With research being unidimensional, however, there is no single to plan and conduct research owing to the fact there is no 'one' single truth that will be discovered. In light of these propositions, this section critically explores and determines the best methods that the researcher applies in answering the research question developed in the introductory part.

2.2 Philosophical paradigms

Living in pluralistic world, there are immediate concerns with the existing relationships between the environment and a comprehension of the study phenomena and how it is presented and researched. Therefore, Hitchcock and Hughes [7] argued that research processes are guided by ontological assumptions, axiological values and

epistemological assumptions. From these assumptions and values, ([6], p. 4) maintains that "*through a sequence of formal steps of logic, from the general to the particular, a valid conclusion can be deduced from a valid premise*". Indeed, what "makes science a science during inquiry is the inherent falsifiability of propositions [8]. In light of this, a pragmatist philosophical approach is deemed fit in exploring whether NGOs are critical drivers of democracy in Africa. According to Saunders et al. [9] citing [10] researchers need to adopt a research philosophy which is a continuum rather than opposite positions. That is, "*at some points the knower and the known must be interactive, while at others, one may more easily stand apart from what one is studying*". Pragmatism is therefore based on the tenets of "what will work and adjusted processes" towards answering the research question. Therefore, assumptions of truth and reality are usually generated through experiential transactions but have to be continuously substantiated [11].

Tashakkori and Teddlie [10] noted that pragmatism is intuitively appealing as it allows the researcher to avoid pointless debates. That is, a researcher avoids engaging in pointless discussions about truth and reality but having a focus on what is of interest. By applying a pragmatism position, the researcher will study NGOs in the way that is deemed appropriate, using the results to bring positive outcomes in the value system. Since the focus on practical applied research [9], the research will observe NGOs as harbingers of democracy through objective and subjective points of view in provision of requisite knowledge as per the research question. Other research paradigms have been avoided. For instance, in realism, a study occurrence or phenomenon exists independent of human consciousness [9]. As such, the rationale that social conditioning (critical realist) is applied in explanation of an occurrence makes it unfit for the current study as NGOs as fillers of democracy in autocratic nations is evidently dependent of human consciousness. Interpretivism position is also avoided in this study. This position holds that reality in a research occurrence is socially constructed and that a researcher is inseparable from what is being researched [9]. Subjectivity as the researcher's motivation towards exploring an occurrence makes it challenging to contextualize the research which is value-laden and thus avoidance of this position.

2.3 Research design

Research design is typically a plan and existing foundations to the plan in which a researcher uses to operationalize and investigate a research occurrence. When exploring an occurrence at hand, do researchers suddenly don a qualitative or quantitative hat? Howe [12] refutes these dogmas arguing that both qualitative and qualitative methods are compatible, often referred to as mixed methods research. Qualitative research is a scientific research process where the investigator uses non-numerical data to understand the reality and truth behind a research occurrence. Contrariwise, quantitative research applies the use of numerical data to test research hypothesis [6].

In underpinning a pragmatist philosophical position, this research will be guided by a mixed methods research ([6], p. 36) states that "*in pragmatism, what something 'means' is manifested in its practical, observable consequences and success in practices, with its links to experience, rather than, for example, abstract theory with little practical import, or ideology, or dogmatic adherence to a particular value system or epistemology*". With pragmatism pulling its weight on practical utility, a combination of these two methods will allow the researcher to intelligently attend to NGOs as democracy harbingers and provide succinct data or information which allows in evaluation of judgments in a rational manner. However, the combination of these methods, the

researcher will grapple with 'commensurability' (reconciling of qualitative and quantitative data) [6]. Although it's a notable challenge, [13] put forward the notion that application of mixed methods renders research as less biased. Therefore, the use of quantitative research maximizes the investigators to make more accurate conclusions on the role played by NGOs in contextualizing their role in driving democracy across Africa.

2.4 Research approach

Following the proposition that research is a linear process [9], a research approach infers the underlying reasoning that determines choice of methodologies. In line with pragmatism and mixed methods research, this research applies an abductive approach/reasoning. Following the review by [14], since an abductive approach is centered at addressing deductive and inductive approaches' weaknesses, the investigator will start with 'surprising facts' towards explanation of these facts with constructs and findings being derived and inferred from the data collected. Unlike inductive and deductive reasoning, in abductive approach, the researcher will use known premises (theory and literature propositions) reviewed in the previous chapter to generate testable conclusions [15].

2.5 Collection and analysis of data

The collection and data analysis phase remains the most important phase in the study as it is directly linked to researchers appropriately answers to the research question. This study will apply a secondary research method where it revolves around using data that has already been developed and used [16]. Contrasting primary research where data is collected by the researcher firsthand, the use of secondary research in this study was linked to various justifications. Firstly, the use of desk research, which is inexpensive and time sensitive, allows the researcher to collect information through internet research. Secondly, the use of secondary data was opted for because information regarding NGOs and their role as fillers is widely available from numerous sources, for example from credible reports from the UN and international NGOs. In addition, the use of secondary was opted because without necessary involving state officials in African governments and corporate NGO leaders, there exists numerous reports on how NGOs participate in either advocating or dispiriting democracy. The use of secondary data allows the researcher to identify trends that NGOs prevalent in Africa adopted over the years in improving democratic initiatives. The inclusion criteria for this research include reports and articles from 2010 to 2024. A wide inclusion criterion is usually adopted owing to the fact that democracy is an ongoing process and in the context of African politics, a range of roughly 15 years will provide critical insights in regard to democracy initiatives by these NGOs. Data collected from this study will be analyzed through content analysis technique. Content analysis technique gyrates on researchers identifying and evaluating themes from data collected [17]. These themes will relate to NGOs as gap fillers as well as ways democracy is promoted or dispirited.

In answering the research question*; as a civil society institution, what is the role of the NGO in driving democracy across Africa?* the researcher will distinguish methodologies. Firstly, the researcher is guided by a pragmatist philosophical position. The foundation to pragmatism is that multiple views are chosen to best answer the research question. That is, observable phenomena will be viewed from both

a subjective and objective lens as this paradigm focuses on practical and applied research. While avoiding other positions such as realism and interpretivism, pragmatism which is based on 'what works will allow the researcher to apply thoughts which should lead to action, to prediction and problem solving. In line with this, a mixed methods research design will be applied. This means that the researcher will rely on both numerical and numerical data collected to explore and contextualize the research occurrence. The researcher will use secondary data rather than primary data not only because of data accessibility, but it is also inexpensive. The data collected will be analyzed through content analysis technique to identify and evaluate themes of interest in regard to the research question.

3. Theorizing NGOs; origins and applications

3.1 Civil societies; origin and definitions

Before understanding existing debates on NGOs as surrogates for improved democracy, a domineering comprehension of the origins and definitions of NGOs is indispensable. Kukkamaa [1] contextualizes NGOs in light of civil societies as preconditioned from the Western model of associations. This model embodies NGOs as representatives of the society conditioned for the development and communal welfare. Considering a neo-liberal discourse, NGOs negate the notion that regimes are successful in-service provision and this stems from these institutions being "non-governmental". The origin of NGOs can also be explicated and be understood from the work of Friedrich Hegel who developed '*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*' in the latest eighteenth century. This concept is assumed as a 'bourgeois society', meaning 'freedom from traditional bonds' [18]. At the height of this 'freedom', civil society is viewed from Antonio Gramsci's perspective that it revolves around the 'social arena'. In this setting, civil societies are concerned with the needs of the society and therefore, they are battlefields for fighting inequality and despotic societies/leadership. In Ref. [19] reviewed civil societies as a combination of social movements and unconstrained collective institutions, with efforts directed towards the betterment of society. These implicit connotations in the African context tend to infer NGOs as civil societies offering social services towards development but deficient in politicization.

3.1.1 The civil society discourse

Although civil space literature is distinct and differing [20, 21], it becomes challenging to define NGOs, especially with growing restrictions on independent civil society organizations. Dupuy et al. [22] defined non-governmental organizations in the context of 'civil space', citing that they are non-profit organizations. NGOs (non-governmental organizations) are;

> *"Non-governmental organizations as private, not-for-profit, non-state formal organizations that are not controlled or operated by governments or the market, but which may receive funding and other resources from governments and businesses" [22].*

Hearn [23] resolutely reiterates that NGOs can be contextualized as voluntary and non-profit organizations. This context means that they are independent of government control and business. However, "non-governmental" boundaries are blurred

considering new debates on what encompasses governmental and non-governmental. Salamon and Sokolowski [24] consider NGO definition and debates as diverse and contested terrain owing to the tremendous diversity of institutions. In their conceptualisation of NGOs, these scholars consider these institutions to operate in the "third sector". However, popular perceptions on NGOs through the "third sector" discourse boils down to 'premium individual entrepreneurship' usually underpinned by autonomy [24]. In most cases, these institutions are a buffer against state power or rather a vehicle for progressive policies and in this case, in third-world countries. In light of this, the contemporary and dominant discourse in this chapter is that NGOs are self-governing institutions geared to improve the quality of life [25–28]. In this regard, this chapter considers NGOs as part of civil society groups that are intermediaries in service provision but set up for the public and mutual benefit of the community.

3.2 Theoretical models on NGOs

NGOs have been theorized distinctively from different angles. Markham and Fonjong [29] used the interest group theory to explain how organizations work towards similar interests. Specifically, this theoretical perspective considers political systems in developing nations and independent groups that work to influence the quality of life (public interest groups) [29]. Following Olson's hypothesis of the 'free rider problem', NGOs in both developed and undeveloped nations are usually supported because individuals in these communities have common interests and efforts by NGOs will improve societal wellbeing. In addition, the community members perceive this as a chance to extend their skills or rather learn new skills. However, interest group theory, when applied to developing nations, could be limited. The majority of nations where NGOs camp have an authoritarian rule, and quasi-authoritarian rule, implying that minimal legal capacity and political structure for NGOs to thrive [29].

Political processes approach: theories of political opportunity structure, as part of social movement theory, emphasize the notion that even though a 'societal problem' exists, it does not directly denote that social movements will be developed [29, 30]. A political approach perspective on NGOs infers that these institutions need to align with the prevailing "external conditions". That is, political opportunity (construed to social, economic and political conditions) tends to influence the success of NGOs attracted to African regimes. While reviewing dimensions of the political opportunity approach that influence the success of NGOs in both developed and undeveloped nations, Markham and Fonjong [29] assertion is construed as political regimes having an openness to new ideas. In contrast, 'unopen' regimes would discourage NGOs in their regions from repressing the formation and uncontrolled advancement of social movements.

Comprador theory is also crucial when it comes to understanding the role of NGOs in driving democracy. Stemming from imperialism during the early 1920s. In further contextualizing compradors, [31] stated that;

> *"The national middle class discovers its historic mission: that of an intermediary.. . Seen through its eyes, its mission has nothing to do with transforming the nation; it consists, prosaically, of being the transmission line between the nation and capitalism, rampant though camouflaged, which today puts on the masque of neo-colonialism. The national bourgeoisie will be quite content with the role of the Western bourgeoisie's business agent and will play its part without any complexes in a most dignified manner" [31].*

Considering this contribution, comprador theory considers African NGOs as compradors in the international political economy. In this regard, NGOs are 'wholly appendages of the international bourgeoisie, depending upon imperialism for their survival and growth' [23].

4. Donor dependence in Africa: nGOs as democratic fillers

Contemporary NGOs are often prevalent in transitional societies [2, 32, 33]. Although these institutions are operationally constricted by the political economy of a regime, NGOs offer a reduced role for the state thus acting as fillers in service provision. Taking into account the New Policy Agenda designed for operating NGOs [2], NGOs tend to rely on donor-driven aid to act as a 'substitution' for failed states [34]. But at what extent are NGOs considered as dependents? Failed governments, especially in third world countries rely on NGOs to provide basic services and amenities to citizens. When applied to NGOs and other charitable organizations, government failure theory contextualizes NGOs to provide 'pure public goods' or rather fill niches left unserved by failed governments. As put forward by Weisbrod government failure theory, non-profit sector is considered to be more active in cases where service needs of political minorities are said to be met [35]. Acting as substitutes could be expanded to NGOs being viewed as vehicles of democratization, thus filling the role of eliminating neo-liberalism in transitional societies.

In Ref. [32] draw from Duncan Green's criticism in his article "*From Poverty to Power*" where NGOs have been overly criticized in their roles in service provision. Following this criticism, this section conforms to assertions made by [32] that NGOs are fillers of 'technocracy' and transformational development in transitional or rather developing societies. This criticism is further reiterating NGOs acting as dependents towards societal improvement. As critical purveyors, this chapter assumes that NGOs offer critical services to citizens in the context of pursuing social, political and economic transformative societal agendas further explicating dependence of these institutions in developing countries. Although NGOs face discrepancies and overlaps between service delivery and civil society functions, the underpinning theme is the elimination of poverty and as phrased by [36], they act as 'moral crusades against poverty'. Nevertheless, the extent literature emphasizes NGOs facing external pressures from existing monocratic regimes as well as Western ideological criticism of 'empowering' the poor and thus mismatch in change [32, 37].

Acting as gap fillers is service delivery owing to government failures, and NGOs' success is having a complementary relationship with governments. The majority of regimes in Africa rely on NGOs to provide critical service delivery. At the start of the millennium, Uganda used NGOs which act as fillers by providing medical aid, education, and safe water in the region [2]. Similarly, a report by Relief Web showed that Somalia is one of the regimes marred by war and poverty and consequently, dependent on NGOs in service provision. The report noted that in 2022, over 1.5 children faced starvation and malnutrition [38]. Kabonga [39] affirms the role of NGOs in the provision of sustainable incomes for citizens in Zimbabwe. Some of the stratagems employed include a focus on the agricultural sector as well as microcredit schemes. However, such reliance obliges having a complementary relationship with existing regimes to make service delivery consensual. But as Nasong'o [40] observes, this relationship is shaped by clientelistic patronage and class but often betrayed by 'catalepsy' of ideas [41]. For instance, while considering NGOs and their impact on

Uganda, one of the government officials asserted that NGOs work closely with local council systems in the country as these systems were vital in implementation and policy development [2]. Even in the context of climate governance at the grassroots level, non-governmental organizations are mirrored to improved presentation and participation. Disposing claims that citizens are usually represented through government delegates [42], NGOs increase democratic representation in governance, resulting in authorized and accountable changes in the context of climate governance. The role of 'filling' among NGOs is evidenced by increasing transparency through representation and participation.

5. Neoliberalism: democratizing Africa through NGOs

5.1 NGOs as compradors

Deeply ingrained in the roots of colonialism, populist movements exacerbated by authoritative regimes are common occurrences in contemporary African political debate. Such environments act as catalysts to the recent democratic recession in Africa. For instance, a report by Amnesty International showcases that Zambians living with albinism were subject to discrimination and mutilation. The NGO further reported that LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex) individuals were subject to government threats from government officials. Zambian government openly condemned consensual sexual relations in online and offline media through #BanNdevupaNdevu #BanHomosexuality movements on the basis that the country is a Christian oriented nation [43]. Such instances openly exemplify declines in democracy in the realm of the twenty-firstt century. However, non-governmental organizations such as Amnesty International remain vocal in driving democracy in these transitional societies. The NGO can be argued to drive democracy by documenting regimes still engrained in authoritarianism and little promise of diminution. This argument underpins the earlier view that NGOs are compradors of change and that transitional societies continue to witness imperial power which is explicated by NGOs [23]. NGOs such as Amnesty International tend to impose an "indirect" rule on transitional societies in the milieu of moral rehabilitation of imperialist regimes. Such intervention is so embedded and routinized in that "it would be more useful to conceive of donors as part of the state it-self" [44]. However, interpreting such instances though Foucauldian analysis in the context of liberal governmentality, such coercive pressures regimes in autocratic states forming acceptable and "novel forms of discipline" [23]. However, as independent compradors, it is disputable that imperial power possessed by NGOs need not be explicated through external domination or rather suffering legitimacy crisis and antagonism. Even though driving democratic transitional societies, it averts recolonization claims.

5.2 Participatory democracies

NGO act as harbingers of democracies as they drive participatory democracy in transitional societies. These institutions are said to provide a host of basic services by allowing accountability and contributions from unprivileged societies [45–47]. Literatures on African political discourse is not ideologically driven as they rest on authoritative regimes, dominant personal personalities and ethnicity. Nonetheless, this does not imply that authoritative regimes are not immune in spreading liberal

ideologies [48]. These liberal ideologies, spread through non-governmental organizations, will reduce the monopoly of public spheres through accountability and participatory measures. In Ref. [47] draw from interviews in The Mail and The Guardian and established that NGOs in South Africa have extended collaboration and participation among citizens. For instance, developed in 1988, AIDS Foundation of South Africa was developed to curb expansion of HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), STIs (sexually transmitted infections) and TB (tuberclosis) infections. By promoting participatory approach, such NGOs have democratized activities across the country. A participatory democratic approach allows NGOs to drive democracies by allowing citizens to implement strategies and quest for solutions. Such a claim is underpinned by an article put forward by [42]. This article specifically embodies NGOs as addressing concerns in light of representation inequities. As posed by [49] *how fairly are representation rights distributed among the member states*? Although the focus is on climate governance representation through NGOs, representation of these vulnerable societies in this context increases "moral responsibility" in regard to democratic governance.

5.3 Inclusive electoral processes

It is no secret that NGOs impact the state, but this effect is often perceived in terms of territorial reach. With cultural and business integration, aided by globalization, African regimes have recently opened up the 'public sphere' allowing NGOs not only to provide basic services, especially in failed regimes but also 'steer' the ship of state [50]. Non-governmental organizations, posed as election observers, tend to influence the democratic processes during African elections and this could be argued to 'steer' fair democratic elections. Similar to developed nations, leadership transition in African regimes is through regular elections but even with the epoch-defining fall of the Berlin Wall [48], geopolitical contests are often rife, with many countries having a deep-seated de facto one-party rule. It is within this context that NGOs act as purveyors of democracy in electoral processes as they lobby for increased transparency and accountability in elections. Governments and NGOs are separate units of the organization (country) directed to provide transparency in service delivery [51]. Since comprehending NGO-state relations is devoid of appreciating abstract objectives and structures in a country, NGOs drive state democracy in elections by educating the wider public as well as the state. For example, the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) is one the prominent NGOs that was used in educating good governance among youthful leaders in Nigeria before the 2023 General Elections [52]. The African Union in 2021 uses the South African Youth Forum as the relevant NGO case study to explore how involving South African youth in participatory decision-making processes and peace-building increases the extent of democracy in elections. One of the notable strategies was the NGO coordinating with other national youth forums in 16 SADC Member States (South Africa Development Community) to train youths on election observation, peace initiatives as well as transitional justice [53]. The report concluded that such advocacy by the NGO resulted in improved peace initiatives and advocates in the region. These instances give inference to NGOs performing the basic function of states which is to impose and maintain political order [51]. With the intractable nature of political suppression of African politics, NGOs are disposed to integrity, and educative responsibility in driving peace initiatives, predictors of democracy.

NGOs, by acting as election observers, drive democracy through advocacy [54–56]. Working closely with legal electoral bodies in African regimes increases citizens' participatory democracy as voter turnout during elections is improved. Citizens are

encouraged to closely work with collective and activist organizations, nonprofits and other kinds of civil society organizations thus augmenting participatory democracy. Disputably, citizens are encouraged to engage in electoral processes owing to the belief that social capital will consequentially be improved [34, 56]. By eliminating the "paradox of voting" (casting a vote exceeds individual benefits), NGOs assist in jettisoning dilemmas by providing assurance to citizens and portraying voting as a civic duty, especially in the expansive autocratic African regimes. For example, in the recent elections in Tanzania, international in collaboration with local NGOs actively educated and mobilized voters even though the country had the same party in power since independence and the fact that anti-NGO laws are rife in the region. In Uganda, local NGOs strived to engage voters in the 2016 elections despite the 2015 anti-NGO law adopted [56]. In both instances, voter turnout was exemplary. Therefore, NGOs can be constructed as 'pillars' of electoral democracy, agreeing with the Tocqueville-Putnam model of civil society. This model affirms the role of NGOs in creating social capital thus improving citizens' trust and confidence in electoral democracy. In Kenya, citizens' contact with NGOs proliferates, not only legitimacy in elections but also participation by almost 44% [57]. Nonetheless, with the lack of legal capacity in the majority of regimes, citizens are unable to express other forms of democracy. For example, in Kenya, citizens are often subject to protesting election irregularities and this soils NGO efforts to drive democracy through elections [57, 58]. In addition, NGOs are perceived by ethnic minorities as setting double standards in the electoral process. Such double standards are often linked and argued to serve the interest of Western Nations, where the majority of these NGOs hail. NGOs have been accused of triggering election violence as well as participating in flawed elections, considered the foundation of 'double standards' in election violence [59].

Widening political consent; NGOs are first responders in legitimizing political power as they act as 'manufacturers' of political consent [50]. By existing regimes, NGOs serve as the hegemonic function of justifying state domination. NGOs drive political consent in African regimes through three major ways: widening public participation, protecting citizens from predatory regimes, and guaranteeing political accountability. Considering NGOs in the shadow of neoliberalism, it is disputable that these institutions (international NGOs which give support to local African NGOs) are transformative antisystem systems that are a "corrective" add-on to the African political economy [60, 61]. However, although political consent is widened in the sphere of international NGOs, [62] rightly observes that rather than these institutions purporting to "speak up", exclusions have been reinforced. For instance, such reinforcements can be perceived in anti-NGO laws which continue to be adopted.

6. Challenges faced by NGOs

NGOs as elite, dominating and institutionalized organs of attaining improved democracy in African regimes are often met with unforeseen challenges that limit their functioning. African regimes have increasingly imposed measures that continually affect the functioning of NGOs. Propagated known as anti-NGO laws, African regimes have come up with a comprehensive set of rules designed to "starve" non-governmental organizations [48]. For instance, Sudan adopted restrictive NGO laws in 2006 but in 2017, the country drafted tougher and harsher restrictive laws. Some of the anti-NGO restrictions are evidenced through regimes having multilayered registration requirements, at the national and local level. For example, operating

NGOs in Uganda require manifold registration requirements; NGO Bureau certification, Uganda's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a letter of operations from the embassy of their home country and a commendation for the sectoral ministry in which the NGO operates [48]. Exacerbated by polygonal procedures, unfettered discretionary powers of NGOs therefore remain in control of governments and this is a cause for abuse as witnessed in the Amnesty International report [43]. Scantiness in autonomous operations results in NGOs being regarded as double-sided, only addressing the interests of those in power.

NGOs are also restricted when it comes to foreign funding. The majority of African regimes are placing a cap on foreign funding, and this limits the scale of operations. For example, in Ethiopia, NGOs that received 10% of funds from foreign agents were placed under the watchful eye of security agencies and this could arguably impact NGO operative capacity. Similarly, although former President Uhuru Kenyatta faced political pressures from NGOs and the opposition, the president vowed to allow external organizations not to advance 'foreign interest' on Kenyan soil, further calling on restrictions on foreign funding [48]. These instances are critical examples of how African regimes tend to foist restrictions and controls over NGOs. It is a result of these controls that NGOs are restricted towards advancing communal agendas and democracies. Brass [63] affirms the role of organizations having resources for the existence and effective operations of an organization. However, the instances of foreign fund capping exemplify the challenges NGOs face in seeking democratic operating environments in the African context. These "caps" could also result in the displacement of accountability-seeking groups and in the long term, loss of democratic efforts. The risk of bureaucratic gridlock in NGO operations is evidenced by some African governments intervening in NGO affairs [48, 63, 64]. For example, in early 2019, Burundian authorities deregistered more than 30 international NGOs on the basis that they distributed "rotten" seeds and that some failed to meet 'non-negotiable' regulations set aside by the Ministry of Agriculture. Including *Ligue Iteka* (the leading human rights activist NGO) [48], the ban and closure showcases intrusive anti-NGO legislation that could implicate democracies in the region. The intrusion, often requiring NGOs to align with government priorities, is a severe violation of the UN requirements for NGO operations. This obvious tension reduces NGOs' freedom to associate freely and pursue democratic interests. As organizations acting as heralds of democracy, should we be surprised at such a level of mismatch? If NGOs design programs that improve accountability and citizens' participation, anti-NGO laws prove that tensions continue to exist. As Dicklitch [2] observes, NGOs in Uganda are expected to work as "partners" if democracy is to be attained. However, the overarching anti-NGO measures weaken accountability, and this can be argued to lessen democracy.

7. Rethinking NGOs in democratization efforts: a way forward?

Substantial bodies of literature on NGOs and democracy exist. However, as put by [65], the majority of these NGOs are 'caught between a rock and a hard place'. This means that the structural position of NGOs is not only to offer public services but also to drive development and democracy. But at the same time, with autocratic regimes still in place, the fastening of anti-NGO laws makes it difficult to advance the conjecture of NGOs as harbingers of democratization. While numerous NGOs, both local and international, share a common orientation with the Western powers

and not just neoliberal orthodoxy, these institutions have an appended chance to develop democracies. NGOs and other civil society organizations have the chance to move from "restrictions" towards accommodation. Shviji [66] identified practical and intellectual resistance of NGOs considering structural adjustment policies in African regimes. However, there is an opportunity for African NGOs to align with these intellectual struggles and evangelize on donor fads. NGOs, through lobbying and educating the public, have a chance to raise awareness of basic democratic rules as well as rights. Such awareness could result in African regimes working towards a more accommodative environment rather than a pushback of these civil societies. Yet, the realization that NGOs cannot replace governments, it is imperative that the autonomous nature of NGOs be allowed to exist but at the same time, align interests with those of the government. However, this could require a change of orientation [32, 67]. That is, NGOs could drive democracy by changing the "original roots" as harbingers of democracies to becoming supporters and facilitators of networked political action against autocratic regimes. Such kind of support could occur through funding, capacity-building, leadership education and institutional linkages. However, the risk concomitant to such an orientation is the question of representativeness. As a risk, are all strata of the society fully represented if democracy is to be achieved?

8. Conclusion

Do NGOs act as surrogates for improving democratic governance in Africa? This chapter has critically examined conjectures that NGOs are harbingers to having an improved democratic state in Africa. Central to democracy in Africa is the role of NGOs as these institutions act as "gap fillers". Duncan Green's article emphasizes NGOs instigating transformational development in transitional societies. As gap fillers, NGOs play an important role in service delivery, especially where developing governments have failed. This chapter identifies that acting as gap fillers compels these institutions to develop complementary relationships with governments. NGOs are regarded as considered as surrogates to democracy as they are compradors to having flexible government administration. These institutions act as agents of change in transitional societies. NGOs force these changes through coercive pressures on autocratic states and this results in acceptable and "novel forms of discipline" in African regimes. Taking into account Foucauldian analysis of liberal governmentality, it has been established that NGOs tend to impose an "indirect" rule on autocratic states, aligning these regimes with a more bureaucratic leadership but to some extent, this is highly linked to recolonization. Apart from NGOs being compradors, democracy is augmented as NGOs encourage participatory democracies. This means that NGOs reduce the monopoly of public spheres through accountability and participatory measures. NGOs increasing participation and collaboration by citizens raises "moral responsibility" and thus improves governance. NGOs also act as harbingers to democracy, and this was seen through having inclusive electoral processes. For instance, in Nigeria, the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) was utilized to educate young leaders on issues of good governance before the 2023 General Elections. NGOs are disposed to integrity, and educative responsibility in driving peace initiatives, and predictors of democracy. However, their role as harbingers is often limited owing to the growing and fastened anti-NGO law. These laws limit the capability of NGOs as well as their freedom to freely and democratic interests.

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Chapter 5

CSOs and the Incomplete Polarization of Czech Society: Civil Society for What and for Whom?

Pavol Frič

Abstract

Against the background of the concept of pernicious polarization and the understanding of the dynamics of the current polarization of Czech society as an interaction of populist and anti-populist forces, the chapter analyses to what extent Czech society is polarized, how civil society organizations (CSOs) participate in its polarization and how the polarization of Czech society differs from other Central European countries. The role of CSOs in the process of polarization is viewed through the lens of A. Gramsci's concept of allied blocs competing for political and cultural hegemony. As a result, the text provides insight into the polarization of CSOs themselves, as well as their activities in linking civil society with populist or anti-populist political actors. The text identifies four deficits in the sources of polarization and analyzes how these deficits contribute to a specific pattern of incomplete and topically fragmented polarization in the Czech Republic. It shows that although uncivilized practices typical of pernicious polarization are employed in the Czech political struggle, there has not yet been a broader alliance between the strongest populist movement on the one hand and the conservative, populist-friendly part of civil society on the other.

Keywords: polarization, civil society, civil society organizations, populism, anti-populism

1. Introduction

Polarization of society is typically perceived as something negative with which civil society organizations (CSOs) should have nothing to do. Fanning conflicts, pitting people against each other, and inflaming emotions are activities and strategies that belong in the repertoire of irresponsible radical politicians, populists, and extremists. This is not business as usual for CSOs. At least no academic text deals with the functions of civil society includes the polarizing function of CSOs. However, it was CSOs (dissident organizations and organizations of mass protest movements)

that polarized society during the Velvet Revolution[1] into supporters of building a new democratic society on one side and supporters of the old regime on the other. It was a short episode that supporters of liberal democracy still attribute to the benefit of CSOs, but conceptually, from the perspective of civil society theory, it remained largely un-reflected. A more important and still debated question was the extent to which CSOs contributed (significantly or insignificantly) to the fall of communist regimes.

In the early 1990s, everything seemed clear and obvious. Civil societies and their organizations in post-communist countries of Central Europe had clearly aligned themselves with the victors over communist totalitarianism, which, in the eyes of the academic public, only strengthened the positive association of CSOs with democracy. The relationship between CSOs and democracy was portrayed as a harmonious symbiosis of two interdependent phenomena. Together with other pro-democratic forces, CSOs were seen as a united bloc against former nomenklatura cadres of communist parties who might seek to reverse democratic development. From the early 1990s until the end of the Velvet Revolutions in Central Europe and after Ralf Dahrendorf [1] published his book *Reflections on the Revolutions in Europe*, the democratic world expected that building civil society as a pillar of democracy in post-communist countries would take a long time (about 60 years), but that everything was on the right track.

On the right track in the sense that the building of a highly diverse but pro-democracy homogeneous civil society continued as normatively prescribed by the Tocquevillian tradition in civil society studies that saw civil society as the pillar of democracy. In the background of building this pro-democratic civil society was the idea that CSOs would always defend democracy and that together, they could even act as a single unified societal actor with its own consciousness of its pro-democratic collective identity. In Marxist terms, it was expected that from "civil society in itself" it would eventually transform into "civil society for itself" [2]. However, this did not happen. On the contrary, in several democratic countries, including those in Central Europe, there was division or even polarization within civil society itself.

Few people noticed at the beginning of the 1990s that when Ralf Dahrendorf wrote about the long-term building of civil society, he meant a "decent and civilized" civil society, and that in fact its counterpart, that is, "un-civil society" [3], "bad civil society" [4], or "fake or pseudocivil society" [5], can also function in the reality of post-communist societies. The normative division of civil society into the "true" pro-democratic and the "false", bad or un-civil society, has been written about in academic literature for a relatively long time. However, a more massive polarization, or splitting of civil society into two antagonistic camps, began to occur in the post-communist countries of Central Europe only with the onset of a strong wave of populism [4] triggered by the financial crisis, after the introduction of austerity measures, and also during the refugee crisis that began in 2014.

To the surprise of many, civil society did not act as a powerful and cohesive firewall against populist authoritarianism [6]. Tocquevillian democratic romanticism collided with the reality of civil society divided by populist politicians, primarily in Hungary and Poland. Internally divided civil society in these countries is openly linked to the polarization of society as a whole [7–12]. The conceptual framework for examining civil societies based on normative Tocquevillian tradition has proven

[1] The Velvet Revolution took place in November 1989 and led to the fall of the communist regime in the former Czechoslovakia.

inadequate for explaining these phenomena. Conversely, Gramsci's normatively neutral model of civil society as an arena, in which various interest groups and political formations coalesce into two polarizing allied camps (historical hegemonic or counter-hegemonic blocs), vying for cultural and political hegemony in society [13], is becoming increasingly popular.

The dynamics introduced into this competition by populist and extremist political leaders, with their aggressive anti-elitism and emotional performances, often result in the transformation of "true" pro-democratic CSOs into "false" ones that support the rise to power of populist and extremist leaders, or help maintain it. One of the most striking illustrations of this process comes from the Weimar Republic period, which existed in Germany between the two World Wars. As Sheri Berman states, CSOs (clubs, voluntary associations, and professional organizations) at that time created conditions for the spread of populist, fascist ideology, helping to destroy democracy in "the Weimar Republic and facilitate Hitler's rise to power" [14]. CSOs infiltrated by members of the Nazi Party (NSDAP) and fascist ideology provided the Nazis with a dense network of experienced activists, who even formed "the backbone of the Nazis' grassroots propaganda machine" [14]. It was not only directly politically oriented CSOs but also charitable organizations that got involved in collecting contributions to support the fascist movement and regime.[2]

It is significant that the authoritarian transformation of CSOs, or the partial colonization of civil society by populist politicians [4], occurs at a time of increasing citizen dissatisfaction with the quality of democracy and concurrently with the transformation of democracy into a hidden oligarchy, which various authors have begun to describe as "façade democracy" [16], "defective democracy" [17], "postdemocracy" Crouch [18], "simulated democracy" [19], "Potemkin democracy" [7] or "fake democracy" [20]. This coincidence suggests that the "degradation" of pro-democratic CSOs into organizations that support authoritarianism occurs precisely during periods of CSO involvement in the process of societal polarization. The phenomenon of societal polarization clearly shows that CSOs do not always serve the ruling forces of liberal democracy and dampen societal conflicts. On the contrary, they can, together with populists, reinforce or amplify societal conflicts [11, 21–23] and serve as a catalyst for the rise of authoritarian political entities to power [6] and even help them maintain this power.

The aim of this chapter is to find out to what extent Czech society is polarized, how CSOs participate in its polarization and how the polarization of the Czech society differs from the polarization pattern of other Central European countries. The following second part of the chapter offers a theoretical background for the investigation of the polarization phenomenon. It looks for the factors that cause the transformation of normal polarization into a pernicious one and provides insights into the dynamics of polarization as a process of interaction between populist and anti-populist forces. The third part looks at the role of CSOs in the process of polarization through the lens of A. Gramsci's concept of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic historical blocs addresses the issue of populist polarization of CSOs in the examples of Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. The fourth and fifth parts examine the polarization of Czech society at the level of political elites, the mass public and CSOs themselves and identify the polarization deficits that distinguish the Czech pattern of polarization from that of Hungary and Poland. Methodologically, the text of the chapter is based

[2] Fred Powell [15] termed the process of co-optation and abuse of German charity for the benefit of Nazi Party's undemocratic plans "the Nazification of charity".

on theoretical analysis, a comparison of historical examples and empirical evidence of polarization tendencies in the Czech Republic and in the entire Central European region.

2. Polarization of society

The topic of societal polarization is certainly not something entirely new in social science literature. American historian Richard Hofstadter already wrote about a "binary political culture" in the 1960s in his book *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* [24], where traditional, provincial forces were juxtaposed against pro-modernization and pragmatic ones. In the 1990s, the phenomenon of political polarization in the United States became the subject of empirical research [see, e.g., [25, 26]] and became one of the standard topics in public opinion research. The phenomenon of political polarization and its unhealthy intrusion into societal relations gradually expanded into sociological studies of modern society.

In this regard, the work of American political science professor Jennifer McCoy and her co-authors Tahmina Rahman and Murat Somer attracts significant attention. In their texts, they define *"societal polarization as processes of group categorization and polarization in the context of social conflict that extend to spaces of social coexistence, such as families, schools, churches, and communities, and that take on the same exclusion, rigidity, and confrontation present in the political struggle"* (McCoy et al. [27]). The extreme polarization of society has harmful effects not only on interpersonal relations but also on democracy. If the proportion of citizens with anti-democratic views is rapidly increasing in a democratic society and the public is becoming divided into, for example, irreconcilable supporters of liberal democracy on the one hand and supporters of authoritarian or illiberal regimes on the other, then this society faces a considerable challenge in combating the erosion of democracy and maintaining internal cohesion [28–30].

Cases of this kind under the name of "stasis" have been well-known from the time of the ancient Greek city-states. Stasis was considered a calamity for the ancient poleis because it endangered not only democracy but also the very existence of the city-state. Citizens of those democracies were so afraid of this word that they feared even uttering it [31, 32]. This fear stemmed from the experience of cases where the escalation of ordinary ideological polarization escalated into an irreversible, irrational, and socially destructive process that undermined the legitimacy of the existing political regime and ended in civil war. Something very similar happened in ancient Rome, where disputes between the optimates (representatives of the wealthy classes) and populares, who sought to politically act in the interests of the lower classes [33], indeed ended in civil war.

In ancient democracies, there were no organized political parties in the modern sense. Stasis thus did not begin as the polarization of political parties, but as the polarization of civil society, that is, of groups of oligarchs, loose political factions, or schools of thought, that is, informal networks united by common ideology and interests. Ancient stasis warns us that ordinary polarization of two ideological currents may contain a pathological seed of fatal, self-reinforcing internal dynamics or the mechanism of "vicious circles" of prejudice, fear, and hatred between two opposing camps. This mechanism is fatal because once it is set in motion, it spirals out of control and cannot be stopped. Once unleashed, it lives on its own, acquiring its own life with unpredictable consequences [34, 35].

2.1 Pernicious polarization

In any democratic society, there must be a certain "normal" degree of difference of opinion; otherwise, there could not even be political competition, but the process of polarization causes more and more people to *"align along a single dimension and people increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of "Us" versus "Them"* [27]. McCoy and her colleagues call this kind of harmful or pathological polarization a "pernicious polarization." According to McCoy and Somer, polarization, or its harmfulness to society and democracy, becomes particularly dangerous when *"polarizing actors exploit formative rifts—cleavages resulting from unresolved conflicts over citizenship rights or national identity or territory"* [34]. Dividing society into Us and Them is accompanied by a black-and-white view, in which we, of course, are the good ones, and they are clearly the bad ones.

Another fundamental criterion that allows distinguishing between "normal and extreme (pernicious) polarization" [36] is the criterion of civility. Under the pressure of polarization, basic *"informal but crucial norms of tolerance and moderation … that keep political competition within bounds"* [28] are disrupted in intergroup interactions. In conditions of pernicious polarization, members of both opposing camps feel threatened by the others, or feel that their way of life, cultural roots, and the entire nation are threatened, and therefore tend to prevail over the enemy at any cost. *"Citizens … have incentives to endorse non-democratic actions to gain or keep power, and to prevent or remove their opponents from power"* [37]. Under the social pressure of pernicious polarization, individuals lose inhibitions to behave undemocratically towards members of the opposing camp and accept violent suppression of their rights to freedom of expression and participation in decision-making.

2.2 Populism vs. anti-populism

Pernicious polarization contains uncivil[3] practices and uncontrollable emotions, which together constitute a reinforcing mechanism that locks politics into a vicious circle and destroys democracy. It is typical that uncivil practices and exalted emotions that incite violence have been associated with the rise of populism in the political arenas of democracies around the world in recent decades. Polarization (Manichean view of society) is even included in the very definition of populism in the form of an irreconcilable contradiction between bad, corrupt elites and virtuous people [38]. It is the combination of populism and polarization that is considered particularly dangerous for democracy [39]. Hungarian sociologist Attila Ágh argues, based on his experience with populism in his own country, that dividing society into two parts is the essence of populism [7]. Polarization is in fact the basic strategy of how populist leaders, their parties and movements rise to the limelight of political power. It is the uncivil, affective political style of populist leaders that brings with it the demonization and dehumanization of legitimate political opponents [40].

Populism is characterized by ethical dualism, emphasizing a strong distinction between good and evil and the identification of an enemy against whom citizens can easily be mobilized with moral indignation. As Alder and Wang [41] point out, this essentially involves an old strategy of "divide and rule" (Divide et impera!), which was already employed by ancient Romans. Some authors emphasize the interactive

[3] Uncivil means lacking civility [4].

nature of "populist polarization" [9]. They describe its societal dynamics as an interplay between populist-anti-populist antagonism [4, 42–44], which has become the main driving force of politics in democratic countries today. According to them, *"polarization between populism and antipopulism became a structural characteristic of the European political landscape"* [44, 45].

This means that the vicious circle of pernicious polarization includes not only populists themselves but also the other side, that is, anti-populists, who employ similar strategies to populists. Stavrakakis states that *"elite-driven antipopulist discourse has consistently employed dehumanizing repertoires enhancing pernicious polarization"* (Stavrakakis [44], p. 62). According to Stavrakakis, pernicious polarization also involves the association of populist leaders and their supporters with abnormality, monstrosity, irrationality, and even paranoia.

Overall, however, there is a belief among polarization experts that populists or populist polarizers are more prone to uncivilized polarizing views, attitudes, and practices than anti-populist polarizers. Organizations of populist movements often deviate from the norms of civility and, instead, fulfil the criteria that characterize incivility or uncivil society. The authors who deal with the topic of uncivil society characterize organizations belonging to it as exclusionist, intolerant, illiberal, undemocratic, militant, aggressive, or violent [46–49].

3. Populist polarization: friendly and unfriendly civil society

Generating negative feelings among supporters of different political factions is defined as "affective polarization" [40, 50–52]. Affective polarization "*reflects the degree to which members of opposing parties dislike and distrust each other*" [53]. This type of polarization is the result of viewing politics as a moral struggle between good and evil and its transformation into an existential struggle between friends and enemies [54]. This is exactly how successful populist leaders understand politics. They try to build a self-friendly network of CSOs, or to create their own conservative, illiberal, or "populist civil society" [4] to help them in the political competition. However, the reverse is also true, especially conservative-oriented, radical, or extremist CSOs who seek allies in populist politics to achieve their goals.

In Hungary and Poland, civil society mirrors the liberal-cosmopolitan vs. nationalist-authoritarian political divide [8, 9, 10, 12, 55]. The infiltration of political polarization into organized civil society is also considered one of the criteria for pernicious polarization of society. CSOs, whose original purpose was to provide freely available services and space for entertainment or recreation, also began to engage in ideological activities and become allies or opponents of the political regime.

Populists' intervention in the normal polarization of civil society reinforces its structural rootedness. For example, Paul Dekker calls the institutional petrification of division in Dutch civil society into several loosely interconnected parts "pillarization," reflecting the confessional pillarization of Dutch society as a whole. *"'Pillarization' is the vertical segregation of different population groups along religious or political lines"* [56]. The result of bottom-up or top-down stimulated pillarization is the existence of several mutually impermeable social pillars, which *"had their own hospitals, burial funds, newspapers and broadcasting associations, social and economic interest organizations, women's organizations, choirs, and soccer clubs"* [56]. Polish sociologist Gregorz Ekiert defines the pillarization of civil society as its vertical segregation *"into distinct compartments with limited interaction across a dividing boundary (be it religious, ethnic,*

political)" [8]. It can be said that the informational and communicational impermeability of individual pillars of civil society makes it a toxically polarized civil society [55].

On the other hand, Ekiert sees pillarization of civil society as a suitable opportunity for the rise of populism, noting that *"the recent rise of populism can be traced to the emergence of pillarized civil societies across the world"* [8]. In this sense, he resonates well with Somer et al. [37], who view polarization as a process that permanently emerges from the bottom of civil society, with political actors deepening it in their own interest.

As hinted at in the introduction to this chapter, even the Marxist sociologist Antonio Gramsci, in his theory of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic historical blocs, emphasized that civil society is an integral part of the struggle between political actors for hegemony in society. He pointed out that each party seeks to create alliances with as broad a segment of civil society as possible for its success [13]. This is typical even during the rise of populism. Populist politicians' polarization strategies divide civil society into friendly CSOs and unfriendly CSOs, making them their hegemonic and counter-hegemonic allies, depending on whether they are currently in power or in opposition. When in power, they financially and otherwise support those CSOs they consider friendly, mainly using state funds. By manipulating state financial support, friendly CSOs bind them to themselves clientelistically and secure their loyalty [12]. This leads to the blurring of boundaries between the state and civil society, as was the case during socialism [57]. On the other hand, populist leaders harass and suppress unfriendly, independent, liberal CSOs in every possible way. They label them with pejorative terms and undermine their legitimacy in the eyes of the public. They consider them illegitimate political players (unelected "political CSOs"), traitors to the nation, and foreign agents who endanger the state's security. Therefore, they seek to economically destroy or at least disrupt the financial viability of unfriendly CSOs.

The first populist leader who attempted to polarize civil society in the Central European region was Vladimír Mečiar in Slovakia during the 1990s. After winning the 1992 parliamentary elections, he formed a coalition government with the nationalist-oriented Slovak National Party. Reports emerged indicating that he had started to create a network of pro-nationalist CSOs allied with him to gain political support, often through financial assistance and favours from his government [58]. For instance, he endeared himself to the Catholic Church and the Slovak Matica, the main organization of the broader Slovak national movement [59]. Mečiar continued to cultivate a loyal segment of civil society even after winning the subsequent parliamentary elections in 1994. He supported the establishment of alternative umbrella youth organizations [60] and trade union organizations [61], which he then utilized for his political support. On the other hand, opposition to Mečiar began to mobilize, with three coalitions of pro-democracy CSOs emerging, the most prominent being OK '98 (Civic Campaign) [62]. This counter-hegemonic alliance was sparked by Mečiar's attempts to weaken mechanisms of public control over the executive branch by parliament, media, and CSOs [60]. It was the coalition of political parties and pro-democracy CSOs that demonstrated how to counter "*leaders who try and use their powers of office to undermine the constraints placed on them by democracy*" [62].

Similarly, Hungary's populist leader, Viktor Orbán, has successfully polarized Hungarian society with the help of a friendly network of CSOs. After narrowly losing the parliamentary elections in the spring of 2002, he called on his supporters to form

"*small groups of people, troupes of friends, civic circles…*" [63], which led to the emergence of the national conservative movement, the "Civic Circles Movement." Besides promoting a conservative agenda, the movement aimed at controlling or politicizing the masses [10, 64]. Orbán managed to create his own illiberal civil society camp, which provided experienced activists to his political party Fidesz, formed new local party organizations, and integrated into the party machinery [10]. The conservative, illiberal civil society camp contributed to Orbán's return to power, which he has retained to this day. Even after seizing power, populist elites led by Orbán and state institutions under their control have continued their efforts to dominate civil society, employing both rewards and intimidation tactics. They have rewarded allied CSOs while bullying autonomous CSOs active in human rights, civil liberties, and anti-corruption efforts, limiting their ability to scrutinize political elites [10]. Demonizing autonomous CSOs as enemies of the nation and allies of foreign powers has also been part of the struggle for civil society, with figures like George Soros being a primary target.

Similarly to Slovakia and Hungary, Poland has experienced the polarization of civil society, with Jarosław Kaczyński, the leader of the Law and Justice (PiS) party, playing a significant role in this process. Under Kaczyński's leadership, PiS formed alliances with conservative-oriented civil society organizations [65]. The Catholic Church has been a key ally of PiS, along with its affiliated organizations, which together constitute a dominant part of Polish organized civil society. Since the early 1990s, the "clerical sector" of civil society has gained increasing influence in Poland, with outlets like Radio Maryja contributing to its dissemination among the general public. PiS, under Kaczyński's guidance, has utilized state resources to weaken the influence of unfriendly liberal organizations deemed hostile and to protect and strengthen the influence of friendly ones [8, 65]. The party has employed tactics of uncivil polarization, including delegitimization, bullying, and intimidation of its opponents [66]. Like their counterparts in Hungary, Polish populists have pursued a clientelistic strategy, rewarding and demanding favours from allied CSOs. Grzegorz Piotrovski [12] describes how populist actors from the PiS party manipulated financial support for CSOs to secure their loyalty. During the PiS government, conservative-oriented patriotic CSOs were considered the "true Polish civil society" and received generous support from the National Fund for the Development of Civil Society, controlled by the state, while other CSOs advocating liberal values suffered from a lack of support.

4. The Czech case: incomplete polarization

In contemporary Hungary or Poland, the inclination of a large part of the population towards illiberal democracy provoked a wave of mobilization of a significant number of liberal democracy supporters, followed by a long series of polarizing episodes, sometimes including symbolic and verbal violence. There is no longer any doubt about the pernicious social polarization between the liberal and conservative camps that completely permeates all levels of public social life, affecting elites, masses and CSOs alike in these countries. The irreconcilability of the two camps and the threat to democracy are manifested, for example, in the repeated public questioning of the legitimacy of the results of democratic elections in these countries. In both countries, we can also see clear signals of the functioning of polarizing and pillarizing mechanisms of civil society formation.

Some authors explain the electoral success of populist parties and movements as a result of the massive involvement of civil society in the struggle for political power on the populist side [8, 10, 59, 67]. Other authors see the absence or weakness of a conservative or clerical segment of civil society as a factor that, for example, conditions the specifically ambiguous Czech position among polarizing societies in Central Europe or as a factor that may explain why the Czech Republic is not as strongly polarized as Poland or Hungary [68, 69].

However, looking at Czech society, we find that while it is not consistently pathologically divided into two antagonistic camps across all its levels and strata, the situation varies according to the different levels and thematic lines of polarization. The situation is different at the level of political elites and elites in general than at the level of mass public polarization, and the situation is also specific at the level of polarization of organized civil society. Overall, the polarization of Czech society looks somewhat incomplete, and this is also due to its actors (polarizers) who have not yet found a common denominator that would allow them to connect all levels of polarization.

4.1 Czech elite polarization

The pernicious polarization and its consequences are most evident on the Czech political scene, which has become strongly polarized along the axis of populism versus anti-populism [70]. The formation of collective identity between two mutually reinforcing, uncompromising political camps can be traced back to at least the period of entry of the first representative of Czech "entrepreneurial populism," [71] the "Public Affairs" party, into parliamentary politics (established by entrepreneur Vít Bárta). The party attacks all mainstream parties and their leaders as corrupt "political dinosaurs." The initiation of a new polarizing interaction between two clearly identifiable political camps, which led to the collapse of the long-lasting stable left-right political architecture, occurred with the electoral success of the centrist and populist Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO 2011), founded by entrepreneur and billionaire Andrej Babiš as an anti-corruption political movement.

ANO continued anti-elite criticism of standard parliamentary parties as incapable, corrupt, and lazy parasites hiding behind the facade of democracy. In his polarizing activity, Babiš persistently attributes to these parties a shared collective identity as a covertly unified political camp, which he pejoratively labels the "post-November cartel". In his eyes, this is a conspiratorial formation of elites, which he suspects of pretending to be democratic competition in order to parasitize public budgets behind the scenes. According to him, the post-November cartel ruled the Czech Republic from November 1989 until 2017, when his ANO won the parliamentary elections and became the leading force in the government coalition. Essentially, Babiš accused traditional political parties of endangering democracy, not only because, according to him, they introduced mafia-style governance akin to Palermo but also because they managed to expand their power networks into the structure of the entire society, including civil society. Later, Babiš defined the "post-November cartel" as: *"an informal power colossus of traditional politicians, journalists, activists, lobbyists, officials, entrepreneurs, and other individuals who share the same interest: privatizing power, ruling quietly, and promoting their deals behind the scene."* [72]. Paradoxically, Babiš defines the "post-November cartel" as his anti-elite manifesto, even though he himself is part of the elite, and as a member of the billionaire elite club, he undoubtedly had to contribute to its construction.

Babiš's entrepreneurial populist companion in Czech parliamentary politics is Tomio Okamura, whose populism has never been merely anti-elitist but has always been rougher and more xenophobic, anti-refugee, anti-Roma, and sovereigntist (menas anti-European and anti-NATO in orientation) than that exhibited by Babiš. Okamura is the chairman of the political movement "Freedom and Direct Democracy" (SPD), which has had stable support from approximately ten per cent of voters but has not yet become part of any government coalition and, compared to Babiš's ANO, plays more of an outsider role in parliament.

However, in terms of societal polarization, its role is very significant. Firstly, Okamura and his political movement actively work to shape a common "patriotic and conservative" collective identity of political forces defending Czech national identity and democracy. Secondly, they consistently label mainstream political parties and their representatives as globalists, cosmopolitans, and progressives who do not have good intentions towards the Czech nation. Thirdly, they demonize CSOs as a hidden centre of power that controls political parties and public administration, promotes foreign interests, and has a progressive agenda. For example, the first deputy chairman of SPD, Radim Fiala [73], stated in his Facebook post: *"... there is currently a factual cold civil war going on, where the Soros network clearly stands on the side of globalists. In the Czech Republic, Soros and his political nonprofits effectively control public media, have a huge influence on state administration and political parties."* The term "political nonprofits" (which became widespread in public discourse after the refugee crisis in 2014) has a pejorative connotation in the language of Czech patriots and conservatives and refers to CSOs with a progressive agenda (anti-corruption, environmental, humanitarian, advocating for the interests of minorities or migrants) that have, however, hidden ambitions to intervene in politics or public policy. While only Babiš and his ANO stand against the "post-November cartel," Tomio Okamura and his party colleagues have clearly outlined two opposing political blocs to Czech society: the patriotic-conservative bloc and the progressive bloc, between which there is an irreconcilable struggle over national identity and democracy. They have not yet precisely defined who belongs to their patriotic-conservative bloc. However, they unequivocally include mainstream political parties and "political nonprofits" in the second, hostile bloc.

Until recently, an important polarizer of the Czech political scene was the former president Miloš Zeman (elected president in a popular plebiscite in 2013 and again in 2018), who played on an anti-elitist string in his public appearances. He emphasized the incompetence and detachment of political elites from the lives of ordinary people. To discredit them in the eyes of the public, he often referred to the elites as the "Prague Café," which included cultural elites together with representatives of CSOs. Zeman's polarizing activities were reflected by the Czech public early in his first term. In a representative public opinion survey from 2014, 70% of respondents stated that his opinions divided the public [74]. Zeman also became notorious for his derogatory remarks about CSOs, in which he labelled most of them as "*leeches attached to the state budget*" [75], thus defining their place in the camp of the Czech society's parasites along with the elites. However, Zeman did not seek to play the role of unifier of the populist political scene in his presidential function, nor did he espouse an ideology that would allow him to do so; he only positioned himself on the side of ordinary people and delineated himself against the elites of mainstream political parties and the progressive agenda of civil society.

The significant success of the populist ANO in the parliamentary elections in 2017 (after which Babiš became prime minister) galvanized representatives of political and cultural elites, as well as the liberal-oriented part of civil society, to

retaliatory polarizing activity, the common denominator of which was anti-populism. Representatives of traditional political parties criticized Babiš's populist political style, the undemocratic, or authoritarian nature of ANO (Babiš was often referred to as its owner), the ownership of a significant portion of mass media, and the intertwining of his business activities with politics. They portrayed Babiš as an acute threat to democracy, labelling him as a corrupt oligarch who dangerously combines political, economic, and media power in his person. After the 2017 elections, the social movement "Million Moments for Democracy" emerged, which pointed out the illegitimate authoritarian practices and corruption scandals of Andrej Babiš and demanded his resignation as prime minister. The repeated mass participation in the protest actions of this movement undermined Babiš's populist ambitions to speak on behalf of all ordinary citizens and decent people. His attempts to question the altruism of the participants in these actions were also unsuccessful.

The anti-populist vs. anti-progressive discourse dominated the pre-election campaign in the autumn of 2021. Under pressure from the "Million Moments for Democracy" movement and a large part of the public, five opposition parties formed two anti-populist coalitions (SPOLU and PirStan), in which the *"anti-populist motivation even surpassed ideological differences"* [43]. After the elections, they formed a government coalition as a cohesive allied anti-populist bloc, which continues its anti-populist rhetoric and attacks the parliamentary opposition (consisting only of Babiš's ANO and Okamura's SPD) as bearers of *"uncivil, spendthrift, undemocratic, but also pro-Russian and pro-Chinese policies"* [42], which represent a major threat to the prosperity and security of the Czech Republic. On the other hand, the opposition populist ANO and SPD accuse the ruling coalition of censorship in the public media, discrimination against the opposition in parliament, and the introduction of a "new totality", that is, the destruction of democracy and a return to a regime similar to that of the communists.

This is a textbook case of pernicious political polarization, where the antagonistic camps of political elites cannot agree on anything, perceive each other as existential threats, and spread it further into society. However, while the anti-populist bloc has a clear enemy and its collective identity as defenders of liberal democracy, the anti-elitist and anti-progressive bloc, although able to name its enemy, is still ideologically forming. The fervent patriotism and conservatism proclaimed by Okamura's SPD may not yet sound attractive enough for Babiš's pragmatic anti-elitism. According to the Czech expert on culture wars Zora Hesová [76], Babiš also occasionally plays the xenophobic and national-protectionist card, but his technocratic populism rather forces him to position himself "rationally" between extremes. Both blocs seek to construct a pejorative identity of the other and impose it on the public. Progressivism indifferent to national interests imposed on the anti-populist bloc and irresponsible populism imposed on the anti-elitist and anti-progressive bloc is, in both cases, either directly rejected or at least ignored and not accepted as a legitimate part of their own identity.

4.2 Mass polarization

For some time now, sociologists and commentators on public affairs in the Czech Republic have been debating whether or not Czech society is divided into two mutually hostile camps. It is significant that the disputes about the split in society are based directly on sociological research data. Even the authors of the same research cannot agree in their public statements whether Czech society is more divided or more fragmented. Some see the idea of a divided society as a myth [77, 78], others as an acute threat [79], and others as a reality [80, 81].

Signals of ongoing mass polarization in the Czech Republic are weaker than in other Central European countries, but they exist and are significant. For example, we can see them in the results of several presidential and recent parliamentary elections, where the Czech public was divided roughly into two equal camps supporting either candidates of the current coalition or opposition political parties and movements. This division of voters and sympathizers of political parties into supporters of the current coalition and opposition was confirmed by quantitative sociological research conducted in 2020 by Alena Macková and her colleagues. The research focused on measuring affective polarization and found that coalition voters sympathize significantly more with each other than with opposition voters and vice versa [81]. However, according to the results of this research, it is mostly concerned with normal ideological polarization rather than pernicious polarization penetrating deeply into people's social lives. While most respondents perceive societal polarization, only a minority transfer this polarization into their private attitudes and behaviour.

Thus, the majority of the Czech public resist political polarization and refuses to confine their lives to ideological bubbles and the world of political collective identities. On the other hand, the main political polarizing rift between anti-progressivism and anti-populism (coalition vs. opposition) is very pervasively manifested in the communication of citizens on various internet portals and social networks. Unfortunately, this communication is often characterized by uncivilized language, conspiracy theories, disinformation, and hoaxes. A significant threat in terms of deepening polarization associated with the internet and social networks today is posed by fraud and lies powered by artificial intelligence (AI). Thanks to AI, damaging deepfake audio clips and videos with polarizing potential are spreading with great speed.

It is not surprising that the views of the two main political camps, that is, anti-elitists and anti-progressives on the one hand and anti-populists on the other, are reflected in the communication on social networks. Both camps have entered into a sharp conflict over the fate of democracy in the Czech Republic. The former express concern about the return of false elitist democracy ruled by corrupt politicians and the threat to national interests, while the latter are horrified by the prospect of the destruction of liberal democracy under the pressure of authoritarian populist leaders.

Ordinary anti-elitists and anti-progressives demand protection for authoritarian leaders from predatory elites, which anti-populists consider civic barbarism that could have spread only due to the ignorance and lower intelligence of the mass of voters who cannot distinguish empty promises from real possibilities. They criticize their irrational, emotion-based voting behaviour and feel intellectually superior to the demented loyalists of populist leaders. Anti-populists refer to public opinion surveys indicating that populist leaders are mainly supported by less educated, older, and poorer people from rural areas. Unlike followers of populist leaders, anti-populists believe that democracy is devalued today more by incompetent masses manipulated by populist leaders than by corrupt elites.

However, sometimes, the views of anti-populists on the voting masses resemble a sort of demophobia, which contradicts the fundamental principle of democracy that the vote of every voter is equal. It is no wonder that anti-elitists and anti-progressives accuse anti-populists of elitism and betrayal of the interests of the people or the nation. They eagerly denounce their democratic hypocrisy when they see them ignoring the undemocratic practices of their anti-populist-oriented politicians. They criticize their accommodating attitudes towards refugees, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, EU worship, support for Ukraine, and constant efforts to impose their opinion on others as the better one.

4.3 Polarization of CSOs?

Is Czech civil society polarized? What does polarized civil society actually mean, and when does this polarization occur? Ben-Ner [22] describes the polarization of CSOs as a continuous process going through three phases: *"From splintering into many disjointed groups with few overlaps to fragmentation with broader categories on to polarization, there is a gradual transformation of boundaries of identities, some coalescing with others into larger groupings that reflect worldviews and ideologies."* To complete the process of polarizing CSOs into two mutually antagonistic camps, according to Ben-Ner, it is necessary that they *"become aligned or subjugated to ´higher-order´ ideas"* [22]. CSOs, whose original reason for being was to provide freely available services and space for entertainment or recreation, have also begun to develop ideological activities and become an ally or opponent of the current political regime. When we look at Czech civil society today, we see that nothing of the sort has happened yet.

What can be observed is the continuous formation of flexible rather smaller, horizontal advocacy coalitions of CSOs that engage in particularistic conflicts (culture wars). This is not a process of institutionalizing two communicationally impenetrable pillars of CSOs, nor is it the formation of two broad ideologically-based allied blocs of CSOs, vertically linked to the most prominent political leaders and parties. Individual CSOs are quite intensively involved in conflicts, for example, over various social issues such as corruption, migration, human rights, animal rights, Roma, women's and other minority rights, the war in Ukraine, poverty, etc. CSOs are usually on either side of these conflicts, thus polarizing them, but only to a limited extent. For example, the refugee crisis (2014) in the Czech Republic started both a wave of refugee aid organized by various charitable CSOs and a wave of anti-Islamist movements and protests framing refugees as a security threat. And a similar scenario is playing out now with regard to refugees from Ukraine. In neither case, however, has there been an ideological extension of this conflict to other CSOs that were not primarily concerned with it?

Indeed, even confessional polarization of CSOs has not reached significant proportions in the Czech Republic. Although, as noted by Ondřej Slačálek [69], the Catholic Church attempted to create broader alliances with political parties based on conservative ideology and engaged in culture wars against issues such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and the Istanbul Convention, this effort did not elicit any positive response from the larger part of other advocacy, leisure, or service-oriented CSOs. It is typical for the Czech Republic that there has been no wider mobilization of CSOs in the name of higher-order ideas. Most civil society organizations remain aloof from the main polarizing split between anti-populists and anti-elitists or anti-progressives. This means that one of the symptoms of pernicious polarization is missing in the Czech Republic. Political polarization has not penetrated too deeply into civil society and the vast majority of CSOs have remained apolitical.

However, a certain part of Czech civil society has recently been bustling with mass activities. This includes a disparate conglomerate of associations, internet platforms, and informal social networks that are in permanent conflict with official authorities and protest against them almost as a matter of principle, regardless of whether populists or anti-populists are in power. These CSOs thrive on the political disillusionment of citizens and their fear of the future, and they exploit every crisis (economic, refugee, pandemic, war-related, or inflationary) as an opportunity to make themselves and their leaders visible. In order to increase their popularity, they spread disinformation and conspiracy theories. As Roman Máca [82], an analyst of

the disinformation scene, notes, *"It is a certain subculture that emerged as a result of massive dissemination of disinformation and propaganda. They demonstrated against Islam, refugees, masks, vaccines, and now it's Ukraine and economic issues."* In short, these organizations and networks are thematically conjunctural, and their purpose always justifies the uncivil means.

With some reservation, it can be said that these organizations form a kind of underclass of CSOs. They are "lumpenassociations"[4] that are part of an uncivilized civil society. Their supporters engage in violence, most commonly verbal and symbolic (such as carrying gallows replicas to demonstrations), engage in stalking against their opponents, threaten them with violence, clash with the police, and forcibly enter public buildings and courtrooms. Lumpenassociations use apocalyptic language, securitize public space, and constantly urge their followers to radically defend society against threats of moral and economic decline, the collapse of traditional values, and democracy.

In this regard, lumpenassociations are very close to populist parties and movements, but they are even more radical. They are often personally and ideologically linked to small extra-parliamentary parties whose leaders strive to enter mainstream politics. Therefore, populist leaders of parliamentary parties generally behave suspiciously and reservedly towards them. However, when they deem it appropriate, they cooperate with them. For example, former President Miloš Zeman [83] openly supported the anti-Islamist movement, but when it came to the opponents of the COVID-19 vaccine, he called them people who were *"taking revenge for their own insignificance."*

Lumpenassociations act in civil society as a loose radical element that awaits its chance to speak more loudly in mainstream politics. They wait for a major populist polarizer established in parliamentary politics to take them under his protection, thus opening access to state support and involving them in the governing system. As for the size of the lumpenassociations segment in Czech civil society, it is difficult to estimate exactly how many there are. However, it is more likely to be in the order of dozens to hundreds of organizations and networks rather than thousands. Overall, they represent a small but highly visible part of civil society with a significant impact on shaping public opinion.

5. Polarization deficits

It seems that the reinforcing polarizing mechanism has already been initiated in the Czech Republic. The process of pernicious polarization is underway, but it is still somewhat incomplete and ideologically uncrystallized. The fundamental question is, why is this case? Why is the Czech Republic not as strongly and unequivocally polarized as Hungary and Poland? What are the differences between the Czech pattern of polarization and those of Hungary and Poland? It can be said that Czech society has several deficits in terms of suitable conditions for the escalation of its polarization.

5.1 Deficit of a radical major polarizer

In the Czech Republic, there is a lack of a populist politician who would fulfil the homogenizing function of the populist (anti-elite/anti-progressive) pole of

[4] The term "lumpenassociation" is loosely associated with Max and Engels' term "lumpenproletariat", which they used to refer to the unproductive, decadent and conjuctural part of the proletariat.

polarization. The most popular populist in the Czech Republic, Andrej Babiš, paradoxically and exceptionally among populist politicians, did not gain political power by harassing liberal CSOs but with their help! Babiš's electoral success was aided by cooperation with the Czech branch of Transparency International and other anti-corruption CSOs. Thanks to this cooperation, he became a well-known anti-corruption figure, which significantly helped him in the 2013 election campaign. However, this unusual cooperation quickly ended after it was revealed that as prime minister, he had co-determined the allocation of state subsidies to Agrofert, a holding he himself owned. This essentially ended his efforts to create a bloc of CSOs that were friendly to him. Moreover, Babiš had no ambition to unite populist parties and movements. He never invited Tomio Okamura and his SPD into a governing coalition to form a populist bloc but joined with a standard social democratic party. Babiš simply did not care about homogenizing a populist bloc composed of political parties and CSOs.

Although Miloš Zeman has recently aspired to the role of homogenizing the populist bloc, his post-presidential position is not strong enough to succeed. In the Czech Republic, there has not yet been a conjunction of a strong populist leader and polarizing tendencies in the political scene and within civil society as seen in Hungary and Poland. In the Czech Republic, the situation regarding major polarizers is not as clear; not only are there several strong populist leaders, but the strongest of them, Andrej Babiš, is a moderate rather than a radical polarizer.

5.2 Deficit of suitable ideology

A fundamental factor that prevented Babiš (unlike Orbán and Kaczyński) from expanding cooperation with civil society was the absence of a suitable ideology that could evoke feelings of solidarity between politicians and CSOs. His entrepreneurial populism [71] offers only a vision of technocratic, efficient state management akin to a private company [84]. It is evident that this vision lacks the potential to create an alternative to the neoliberal ideology prevalent among Czech advocacy CSOs. Although Babiš has recently been trying to align himself more with the conservative or clerical part of civil society, he faces resistance (for example, priests refuse to let him into churches). His long-cultivated image as an ideologically neutral technocrat (and partly his communist past) makes his courting of conservative ideology seem inauthentic. Another problem in Babiš's alignment with conservatives is that the conservative wing of the political spectrum has long been occupied by the standard Christian Democratic Party (KDU-ČSL). Overall, in the rather atheistic Czech society, the conservative part of civil society is considerably weaker than in other Central European countries. It is telling that the Catholic Church did not become a national church in the Czech Republic [85].

5.3 Deficit of populist-friendly CSOs

For Czech populist politicians, it is typical that they have long worked to clearly define their unfriendly "political nonprofits," but they forgot to publicly define their friendly CSOs. It started with former President Václav Klaus, who first criticized the very idea of civil society and then denounced the ideology of "NGOism". He saw the participation of CSOs in politics or public policy as a threat to freedom and democracy because they did not get their mandate to have a say in politics in democratic elections [86]. Even before Andrej Babiš entered politics, all the most important populist figures on the Czech political scene agreed that civic activists only bring

chaos to the management of society and are a completely unnecessary obstacle to modernization (they obstruct the construction of highways and other useful facilities). Environmental activists, in particular, have become the scapegoat for failed modernization projects. The word "activist" has become a slur in the Czech Republic in general.

During his presidency, Miloš Zeman tried to discredit CSOs from an economic point of view and openly referred to them as parasitic organizations. Babiš, in his role as prime minister, only hinted at the parasitism of CSOs and then unsuccessfully tried to cut their state budget subsidies. It is characteristic that both Zeman and Babiš referred to a wide range of service and leisure CSOs. Tomio Okamura's efforts to reduce this frontal attack on CSOs to mere "political nonprofits" could not fundamentally change the negative relationship between populist leaders, or rather their voters, and the CSO community. Under the pressure of populist leaders, the credibility of CSOs in general has suffered significantly in the eyes of the Czech public.

As for Babiš, after a negative experience with anti-corruption CSOs, he was skeptical about forming further friendships with CSOs. As Hanley and Vachudová [68] point out, Babiš has significant economic and media power, allowing him to effectively use robust political marketing and create friendly clientelist networks within political, administrative and economic elite, so he was not particularly interested in building his own network of friendly CSOs. However, it is very likely that despite this, Babiš has strong voter support among small leisure and community CSOs in small towns and villages with mostly older membership bases (gardeners, breeders, beekeepers, tourists, senior clubs, etc.). However, these organizations do not share a common ideological base. Babiš never named them as his allies and did not mobilize them collectively in the interests of his electoral success. As prime minister, Babiš did not hold a protective hand over the conservative part of civil society. He did not establish significant clientelistic relations with it and did not give it preferential treatment. He has never resorted to the tried-and-tested "Divide-and-rule!" tactics used against CSOs by successful major populist polarizers in the Central European region.[5] The examples of Orbán's Hungary, Kaczyński's Poland and Mečiar's Slovakia speak unequivocally in favor of Gramsci's thesis on the formation of political and cultural hegemony. It implies that whoever succeeds in polarizing civil society and forming an alliance with its currently stronger part gains power (wins parliamentary elections).

Babiš has not even established friendly relations with traditional advocacy organizations such as employers' associations and trade unions. For example, unions did not support Babiš in the presidential elections. On the contrary, union leader Josef Středula ran for president against him, and when he withdrew his candidacy, he recommended his voters to vote for Babiš's competitor. Finally, we should also mention the role of chance, or rather the "bad timing" of Babiš's premiership during the COVID-19 pandemic, which naturally put him in opposition to the numerous lumpenassociations protesting against the restrictions he himself imposed. Among them, he would not find any friendly CSOs even if he wanted to. But Babiš does not want an alliance with the lumpenassociations and their leaders, and he just wants their voters.

[5] Populist leaders in Slovakia have behaved similarly to Babiš. First, Robert Fico (the current prime minister, who was also prime minister in 2006–2010 and 2012–2018) and then Igor Matovič (prime minister 2020–2021), who managed to strongly polarize the Slovak political scene and general public, but not civil society.

5.4 Deficit of Czech national "deep story"

Andrej Babiš also has a problem with any greater inclination towards nationalism. His Slovak origin (in fact, he is an immigrant in the Czech Republic) prevents him from authentically assuming the role of a nationally charged political leader. Similarly, Tomio Okamura, who has a partial Japanese background, faces the same challenge. Neither of them can authentically invoke Czech national myths or rely on them to legitimize their careers as populist leaders or claim the role of a homogenizer of a wider patriotic-conservative bloc. Additionally, there is the factor of "saturation of Czech nationalism" [87], which indicates the fulfilment of Czech national ambitions in the twentieth century when they first gained an independent national state after World War I and then, after World War II, a single-nation Czech state was established through the expulsion of three million Sudeten Germans. In the Czech Republic, there is therefore no strong emotionally charged narrative of acute national injustice that could offer populists and nationalists an opportunity to appeal for its urgent resolution. In Hungary and Poland, such "deep story" [88] exist and provide populists with a valuable source for mobilizing their supporters.

6. Conclusions

As seen, in comparison with Hungary and Poland, the Czech Republic lacks both the symbolic resources and a suitable major polarizer for the escalation of pernicious societal polarization. Finally, we can ask whether the incomplete polarization of Czech society is also a consequence of the depolarizing activities of CSOs or of the compactness of their liberal orientation, which makes them resistant to the populist, polarizing lure. First of all, it should be seen that the vast majority of the roughly 150,000 Czech CSOs do not comment at all on the issues of the threat to democracy and the alliance of civil society with the world of politics. However, the resistance of most CSOs to the polarizing efforts of politicians is not based on the pro-democratic values of balancing public debate, opposing extremism and mitigating *"the principal polarities of political conflict* "[89], but on the apolitical and civic comfortable behavior of their members. Nevertheless, even this has a significant depolarizing effect. On the polarization scale of Czech CSOs, there is no significant emptying of the neutral centre in favor of the radical poles.

As has already been said, the conservative part of civil society is weak. This is mainly due to the weak Catholic Church position in Czech society, which cannot function as a centripetal force around which a conservative block of political and civil forces is forming. Its weakness must be sought in its history, which coincidentally put it at odds with Czech nationalism [90]. As a result, the Roman Catholic Church has become the object of anti-clerical resentment of the majority of the Czech population. Not only is the Catholic Church, according to public opinion, responsible for the martyrdom of the Czech national hero, Jan Hus (zealous critic of the Catholic Church in the fifteenth century), but it is also a symbol of the Germanization of the Czech nation of the period when the Czech lands were part of the Habsburg monarchy. The Catholic Church acquired the image of the extended arm of the German-speaking Aristocracy and did not participate significantly in the emancipatory efforts of the Czechs for an independent state at the end of the First World War. It also did not play a major role in the fall of the communist regime, as was the case in Poland, for example. Moreover, for a long time after the Velvet Revolution, in terms of shaping its

image, it wasted much effort and attention on the restitution of property confiscated from the churches by the communists. Only very marginally did it devote itself to issues of building democracy and civil society [91]. Nor has the Catholic Church systematically cultivated its charitable image in public space.

The more extensive restitution of church property after 1989 was opposed by the majority of the public [92]. Czechs are mostly either convinced atheists or do not subscribe to any church [93] and view church restitution as an unjust enrichment of the church at the expense of others [94]. The Catholic Church is perceived by the public as a rather selfish institution that is mainly devoted to its own interests and cannot respond honestly to scandals of abuse of children by its priests. Its trustworthiness in the eyes of the public is low and has long been between 25 and 30% of the adult population. Therefore, the most prominent Czech populists (Klaus, Zeman, and Babiš) have long pandered to the majority anti-clerical sentiment of the public and have not supported the Catholic Church in its efforts to restitute church property. On the contrary, they have tried to weaken its influence in society (e.g. all three supported the adoption of a law on the taxation of financial compensation in church restitution in 2019). The weak and long-weakened populist Catholic Church has recently been developing some polarizing activities (e.g. in the interests of the pro-life and traditional family movements against abortion policy), but this is only sufficient for short-term ad hoc alliances with populists of various kinds that can at most block the adoption of new liberal rules [69].

Nor are the polarizing activities of liberal-oriented CSOs massive. Their anti-populist mobilization depends on the degree of perceived acuteness of the threat of a populist bloc victory in the parliamentary elections. At the time of the rule of the pro-democratic anti-populist coalition, this threat is not yet acute. That is why the activity of the anti-populist movement Million Moments for Democracy is currently very subdued. It is symptomatic that the nationwide umbrella association of CSOs "ANNO" (Association of Nonstate Nonprofit Organizations), apart from a few statements in support of the reputation of CSOs, has not carried out any mobilizing activity against the populist attacks on democracy and CSOs. Only a few advocacy coalitions and networks of CSOs are trying to do so (e.g. Advocacy Forum OSF, Network to Protect Democracy, and Czech Elves). However, even in these cases, it is mainly a non-mobilizing, educational and expert activity.

It is common for the actions of lumpen associations to provoke an immediate reaction in public space from pro-democracy, liberal-oriented advocacy organizations, journalists and commentators. They label the leaders and supporters of the lupenassociations with various pejorative names such as "desolates" or "pro-Russian cockroaches". This, of course, adds fuel to the fire of polarization among CSOs, but it cannot be said to cause any significant escalation. There are no two communication-impenetrable blocks, although their communication is often uncivilized. Even in this case, there is no pillarization of Czech civil society. However, the polarizing activities of a wide range of CSOs can serve as a kind of warning to us not to ascribe to CSOs only one correct, that is, depolarizing, role in democracy at all costs. It does not matter so much whether they support the escalation of polarization or which side of the polarization rift they stand. For what reason and for whom are they polarizing or depolarizing?

Paradoxically, all populists use polarizing strategies in order to eventually achieve a kind of depolarizing nirvana (national unity, classless society, pure race, etc.). That is to say, they actually want the opposite extreme, but one that is as dangerous for democracy as pernicious polarization. For once national unity is achieved, they continue the polarization by pushing it further beyond the borders of the state, where

they identify an external enemy against which an internally united country must confront. Those who disrupt this unity are traitors, including CSOs, who polarize and disrupt national unity by criticizing the corrupt and authoritarian practices of populists. Therefore, the assessment of CSOs' involvement in polarizing or depolarizing activities depends in many ways on the nature of the political context in which these activities take place.

It turns out that the role of CSOs in the process of polarization in society is ambiguous. It will require much more attention than it has received so far, because the involvement of CSOs in the polarization or depolarization of society has a significant impact on democracy. The future direction of research in this area should focus on uncovering the factors explaining the colonization of civil society by populist leaders, or the conditions for the formation of a populist-friendly civil or un-civil society, as well as the polarization and pilarization of civil society itself. It will certainly be interesting to explore the value connotations of CSOs' involvement in deepening social polarization, that is, to find out under which circumstances CSOs' polarizing activities are pro-democratic or pathological. It would also be good to know what polarizing or depolarizing practices of CSOs promote democracy, or what forms of democracy do they promote? Future research should also provide answers to questions about whether the depolarizing activities of CSOs can protect liberal democracy when toxic populist leaders (sowers of hatred) in power call for depolarizing society (as is currently happening in Slovakia). This kind of research would help avoid unpleasant surprises such as the depth and breadth of CSOs' connections to polarizing political actors. It would also help to better answer the question of whether the Czech Republic is more of a landscape before a great polarization battle or whether we are facing a period of depolarization of society.

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Chapter 6

The Ability of Non-Governmental Organizations to Overcome Crises: The Case of NGOs in Slovakia during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Michal Hrivnák, Peter Moritz and Marcela Chreneková

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic also significantly affected civic activities and third sector actors. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had to quickly adapt to the consequences of the pandemic and strengthen their resilience in times of increased uncertainty. Despite the significant limitation of the possibilities to carry out their own activities and implement ongoing projects, the actors of the third sector were able to re-focus their innovative action and utilize emerging opportunities to open new activities and programs to support both institutions' resilience toward crisis and support their own communities through tailor-made social innovation. The aim of the chapter is to conceptualize strategies of NGOs in Slovakia aimed at strengthening the resilience toward negative impacts of the pandemic on both managements of NGOs and well-being and health of the own communities. Using data on the activities of 106 community-led NGOs in Slovakia, we will demonstrate the ability of third sector actors to adapt to rapidly changing conditions.

Keywords: non-governmental organization, grassroots, COVID-19, adaptation strategy, resilience

1. Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has significantly affected both the economic and social development of countries around the world [1]. Due to the need to slow down the spread of the virus, the European Union (EU) countries introduced significant measures disrupting the well-established policies, social structures and models of behavior, which were long considered to be a part of established *status quo* [2]. Some significant restrictions on mobility were established in most countries of the EU. As a result of these restrictions, it was necessary to deal with emerging challenges—especially not only in the area of unemployment growth but also in the area social life, or the well-being and mental health of the population [3].

The NGOs played a vital role in supporting not only civil communities but also other spatial actors in overcoming the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the most general definition, a non-governmental organization is defined as almost any organization that is not systematically funded by the public resources [4]. Newer conceptual definitions understand NGOs in the context of their tremendous diversity as institutions or organizations that do not necessarily have to be formally or legally constituted, that are private, self-governing, non-profit-distributing and engaging people without compulsion. NGOs produce benefits for target communities rather than for those who perform their activities. The activities of NGOs are not casual or episodic, unpaid and uncompulsory [5]. NGOs are usually characterized through four basic traits: they are (1) voluntary, (2) non-partisan, (3) non-profit and (4) non-criminal [6]. Throughout history, NGOs primarily supported social welfare [7]. In the twenty-first century, in the conditions of the Western countries, the activities of NGOs shape both social relations and power relations by creating pressure to change national or local policies [8], along with addressing broader social challenges and needs of specific population groups and individuals. The services and activities of third sector actors impact the processes of formation, emancipation and capacity-building of various local communities, communities of interest or marginalized communities [9]. Willets [10] differentiates between the operational and campaigning NGOs. While the operational ones mainly focus on social issues and issues of marginalized groups, campaigning NGOs rather focus on broader societal and political change through challenging the policy-making processes. Some NGOs can rather be understood as grassroots communities [11], which try to address existing global or local challenges. Seyfang and Smith [11] recommend to differentiate civic actors based on the "value niche," which unites and permeates the entire community of the non-governmental organization. Third sector actors usually disseminate information about economic, sociocultural or environmental challenges and identified solutions through the formation of rich networks of cooperation with government and corporate organizations [12], or through active participation in spatial planning [13].

The NGOs provide diverse services for their own community or target groups whose living conditions change in the time of crisis. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the living conditions in slum communities and limited the access of these communities to basic services, food, protective equipment and medicines [14]. In the environment of developed urbanized centers, on the other hand, the pandemic deepened food insecurity worsened the possibilities of transport in the city, options of spending free time and utilizations of public spaces. Many localities in Europe reported in 2020 and 2021 that local health care system collapsed. Symptoms of depression and other mental health problems developed in case of many individuals [15]. Last but not the least, the pandemic had an impact on the employment. In the conditions of Slovakia, up to 38% of employers reduced the number of employees [16], which led to worsening of the social situation of households.

The NGOs assist communities in times of crisis and uncertainty [9]. However, they had to deal themselves with diverse emerging barriers to maintaining their projects and ongoing activities. The restrictions associated with the pandemic limited the ability of NGOs to act. NGOs could not gather volunteers and the community together, what naturally affected both the implementation of projects and the provision of services, as well as planning processes [17]. Daolei [18] identified three main challenges that NGOs had to deal with during the crisis: (1): financial shortages, (2) difficulties in project implementation and (3) employee turnover in response to tightening government regulation. Sayarifard et al. [19] also identified the barrier of significantly worsened access of NGOs to the target groups to which they provide services. Some of the less-discussed topics include that sector actors also had difficulties

with maintaining the pre-pandemic employment levels [20]. At the same time, the support of national governments toward the third sector actors was often insufficient or unaddressed [15].

The literature discussing resilience-building and adaptation strategies of NGOs during the pandemic brings diverse and often contradictory conclusions. It appears that the challenges faced by NGOs are to some extent institution-specific, have a local-specific context and depend on the scope of NGO action, its ability to maintain income from own activities and identify opportunities that arise in times of crisis [2, 21]. Studies of NGO resilience in times of previous global crises (see [22]) have already shown that some NGOs are more sensitive to crises than others. Some studies came up with the hypothesis that NGOs can be divided into those benefiting from the crisis and those harmed by the crisis. Results of Waniak-Michalak et al. [21] suggest that NGOs operating in health and social care gained from the pandemic, while others lost. However, other authors of empirical studies did not identify significant transformation of NGOs during the COVID-19 pandemic [2]. Several empirical studies have already evaluated NGOs' strategies in the field of strengthening resilience against the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the conditions of China, these strategies were focused on maintaining the cooperation with governments and local communities, as well as own self-improvement action [18]. Empirical studies carried out in developing countries also indicate the adoption of strategies focused on the strengthening of ties in local communities and the growth of the volume of collaborative projects between NGOs and other partners during the pandemic [23]. Results of Ahmed et al. [24] suggest that NGOs have kind of natural ability to maintain resilience in times of emergencies, expressed in 4C framework including four components: (1) capability of problem assessment, (2) collaboration with stakeholders to pool resources, (3) compassionate leadership and (4) communication for quick and effective decision-making. Otherwise, however, the internal strategies of NGOs to strengthen resilience in times of a pandemic have not been sufficiently conceptualized.

However, little attention was paid in the literature to specific internal decisions, activities or social innovations that NGOs introduced in order to strengthen their resistance to the impacts of pandemic. It is also not sufficiently clarified in the literature which NGOs were "untouched" by the crisis and whether their successful development during the pandemic is caused by a certain form of "natural resistance" or by appropriately chosen adaptation strategies. We are therefore addressing a gap in knowledge that is reflected in the following research questions:

Q1: What barriers did NGOs face during the COVID-19 pandemic in the conditions of Slovakia?

Q2: In what way were NGOs able to support overcoming the consequences of the pandemic and movement restrictions in society and thus support well-being in communities? Did they introduce new services in the time of crisis, which can be considered as social innovation?

Q3: What resilience-enhancing adaptation strategies have NGOs adopted in the conditions of the investigated country?

2. Objectives and method

The main aim of the chapter is to conceptualize strategies of NGOs in Slovakia aimed at strengthening the resilience toward negative impacts of the pandemic on

both managements of NGOs and well-being and health of the own communities. The secondary objective is to identify specific measures and innovative solutions of non-governmental organizations that should contribute to the survival and ability to continue in implementation of ongoing projects and providing services.

The research design is based on grounded theory, evidence-based research, in which we formulate research questions without expecting "what we will find" [25]. Specifically, the study has the design of a descriptive and comparative analysis, based on comparing the cases of individual NGOs in the sample. We arbitrarily decided to examine the patterns of resilience toward crisis only in case of the so-called grassroots communities—NGOs, which can be considered community-led initiatives with potential to lead the innovative activities in spatial development. A total of 83,932 NGOs were active in Slovakia by 2022 according to data of the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic [26]. We manually filtered from among 20,734 records of NGOs available in the Register of Institutional Units in Slovak Republic database [27], while 462 grassroots communities, registered as a form of NGO, which met the following criteria:

- Their declared activity is related to social, environmental, cultural or economic problems within locality, or in wider space
- They are defined as community-led initiatives or they clearly refer to the existence of their own community of supporters
- They have the potential to be a source of social innovation

From the mentioned population, we managed to obtain a sample of 101 NGOs (grassroots established as NGOs), which were responded through an extensive questionnaire in combination with mass interviews with several managers or volunteers. The obtained data are both quantitative and qualitative in nature. For the purpose of data processing, common descriptive methods are utilized, together with selective coding [28] of open answers that helped us to quantify the data. We use stage-based modeling [29] procedures to create a schematic model of strategic decision-making in non-governmental organizations.

3. Perceived impacts of pandemic on NGOs

In this chapter, we will evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on NGOs in the conditions of Slovakia on a sample of 101 non-governmental organizations that can also be understood as community-led grassroots. The sample is appropriately distributed according to selected, observed characteristics. From the point of view of the geographical distribution, it can be concluded that the sample includes NGOs from all eight NUTS III regions of Slovakia, while the significant share of NGOs in the sample is located in cities (same as in the case of population). Up to 28.7% of responded NGOs are located in rural settlements (in conditions of Slovakia, in settlements with less than 5000 inhabitants), while this ratio follows the distribution in the population. The sample has a normal distribution in terms of the age of NGOs, as the sample includes not only NGOs that were established just before the onset of the pandemic but also NGOs that have existed since the foundation of the Republic. However, NGOs that were established between 2005 and 2015 prevail in the sample.

In the survey, NGOs were asked to declare the key development areas of their interest. In the sample, we have 28 NGOs that primarily focused on green topics, climate change and environmental issues, 23 NGOs that were primarily devoted to the development of culture, art and sports, 18 NGOs that were mainly devoted to community development activities and participatory activities, 14 NGOs that provided especially social services and care for marginalized communities and 7 NGOs that were predominantly dedicated to the development of sustainable mobility in municipalities. To summarize the basic descriptive characteristics of this sample, the given 101 NGOs in the investigated year 2022 employed 393 full-time employees and 248 part-time employees, utilized voluntary work of 12,247 volunteers, created strong local communities, the total size of which was estimated at 12,247 persons, while as many as 47 of the 101 responded NGOs declared that they had been a source of social innovation in the form of new products and services in the past 3 years (2019–2022). The total direct economic effects (total expenses in the economy) of these 101 NGOs reached the sum of more than 11.3 million euro.

Empirical studies carried out so far did not find consensus on the question of whether NGOs have a certain form of natural resistance to crises or rather to flexibly overcome challenges emerging due to rapidly changing conditions in a period of uncertainty. Some NGOs were not significantly affected by the pandemic, even in the conditions of our study. However, these NGOs represented a minor part of the sample. On the basis of selective coding, it was identified that 66.34% of respondents in the sample felt significant or very significant impacts of the pandemic on the organization's activities. On the contrary, 33.66% declared that the pandemic did not limit their activity at all, or limited it slightly.

First, we will discuss the group of negative impacts of pandemic in the area of management of NGO and organization of work (**Figure 1**). The results indicate that the restrictions did not affect the survival and employment of NGOs very significantly. Only 4% of organizations reported termination or long-term suspension of activities due to the pandemic. In particular, two organizations that were founded just before the onset of the pandemic and were unable to secure the necessary financial resources to adapt to new conditions (a newly established cultural center and a music

Figure 1.
Share of respondents perceiving negative impacts of pandemic in the field of NGO management and organization of work.

incubator) had to cancel their projects and activities. Another example is an NGO that could not run its children's camps, or an NGO that dealt with the issue of mobility and organized public mass bicycle rides through the city.

The reduction in the number of coordinators, or volunteers who carried out activities during the pandemic, represented a critical problem; however, only in case small part of the sample was perceived. NGOs, which were dedicated to the production of cultural events, lost volunteers in particular. Up to 17.6% of the respondents in the sample declared a decrease in the number of volunteers, which, however, can be considered a relatively positive finding. The majority of NGOs maintained their volunteer communities during the pandemic. Those initiatives, whose communities were formed on the principle of membership, often declared a reduction in the number of members. The problem to finish the implementation of ongoing projects, or the inability to secure new sources of funding, affected employment in NGOs. As many as 13.9% of initiatives in the sample reduced the number of full-time or part-time employees. This share is significantly high, considering the fact that more than 50% of NGOs in the sample do not employ at all. This indicates that NGOs have rather tried to move from the professional activities back to a mode of civic activism based on volunteerism. A little-discussed problem was also the significant decrease in the number of clients, the deteriorating health condition of clients and target groups. The most frequent barriers in this group were related to the loss of motivation in the team of NGO managers and coordinators, or the considerable workload of the staff, who had to perform work in bursts, especially in case of the provision of social and health services. These services were often running in hours when there was no lock-down (night hours), which led to exhaustion. The employees and volunteers of the organizations also faced health problems themselves. It turns out that the third sector also suffered from a lack of human capital in periods with a high share of infected population.

With the exception of four organizations, the investigated NGOs were able to continue their activities during the pandemic period 2020–2022. However, when trying to finish the implementation of ongoing projects, they encountered a number of problems, especially due to movement restrictions, changes in behavioral models within communities, the worsening health status of the population and the growth of inflation. After quantifying the data obtained from the guided interviews, we note that only 7.92% of the responding NGOs declared that they were unable to complete the implementation of projects whose project cycle ended during the pandemic. However, this result is rather a consequence of extensive organizational changes that NGOs implemented in order to avoid returning the non-invested financial contributions, or bearing the corrections.

Almost 60% of the responded NGOs declared problems with finishing the project activities and funding of activities in line with the scheduled budget (**Figure 2**). Some NGOs had to suspend projects of a collaborative nature and that were funded from public or private resources. On the contrary, the implementation of projects in cooperation with academic actors (especially the Horizon 2020 scheme) continued practically without problems, as the coordinating academic partner bore the consequences of uncertainty and changing conditions. However, up to 34.65% of the responded actors declared the loss of project partners on the ongoing projects. Problems of a specific nature were experienced by NGOs that provided social and health in-field services. In conditions of Slovakia, drug-addicted communities, communities of refugees and the homeless depend to the highest extent on services provided by the NGOs and other third sector actors. During the guided interviews,

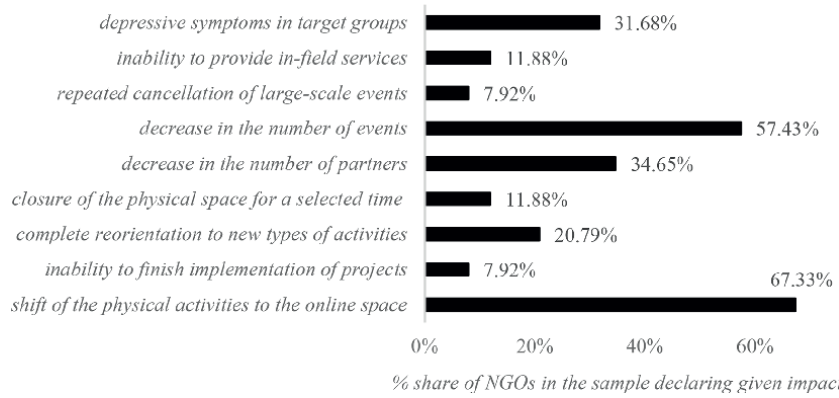

Figure 2.
Share of respondents perceiving negative impacts of pandemic in the field of ability to implement projects and carry out activities.

NGOs reported a significant deterioration in living and health conditions of these communities during the pandemic. NGOs had to face dramatically worsened conditions for providing their services, due to the frequent occurrence of COVID-19 in these communities. Therefore, in certain cases, the provision of selected services was limited (especially counseling and legal support for refugees in selected detention facilities, or the opening hours of homeless shelters were limited). As many as 11.88% of responded organizations declared at least a temporary inability to provide in-field services during the pandemic, but if we take into account exclusively NGOs focused on the provision of social and health services, this share exceeds the threshold of 33%. The provision of nature-based solutions and services, on the other hand, was not affected by the pandemic.

In terms of practice, the implementation of projects was primarily affected by lockdowns. Restrictions on movement delivered a dramatic decrease in the number of events that could be organized. This dramatic decrease was declared by up to 57.43% of the responding actors. It should also be taken into account that those actors who did not experience this barrier already implemented their educational programs in an online environment or implemented educational activities with small groups in an outdoor environment. As many as 7.92% of actors declare the complete cancelation of large-scale events, what occurred repeatedly. This mainly concerns festivals that have been repeatedly canceled for 3 years in a row or held with a dramatically reduced number of visitors. The occurrence of community meetings, brigades and community activities was also reduced. Therefore, the disruption of the established frameworks of community life can be included among the less visible damages of the pandemic within the third sector. At this point, it should be noted that especially the grassroots communities often create solutions that can represent a kind of total institution for the "own community" of the initiative. Therefore, for example, temporarily closing the physical spaces of community centers could lead to a deterioration of the psychological and physical health of individuals that consider the community-based life as critically important for their well-being. Only 11.88% of responded NGOs declared the long-term closure of the physical premises. Usually, NGOs looked for ways of alternative organization of spending time in the space and limited the possibilities of its use, which often led to the exhaustion of the coordinators and volunteers of the initiative. Up to 31.68% of actors reported the presence of depressive symptoms in

communities of NGOs. We will talk more about the solutions that NGOs introduced in order to support the health and well-being of their target communities in the next chapter. The fact that the main adaptation tool in the lock-down period is the transfer of activities to the online space is doubly true in the case of non-governmental organizations. Exactly 67.33% of respondents "artificially" transferred their activities to the online space. However, we also identified initiatives that did not need to use online communication. These were either the activities of environmental activists, educational activities that were not subject to certain restrictions or arts-oriented activities that did not require larger events. The last relevant topic in the evaluation of this group of barriers is the decision of many NGOs to open completely new activities that they had not executed before (20.79%). Here, we come to adaptation-building measures, which often included not only the provision of products and services related to health protection during the pandemic but also new types of services for spending free time in the community, new moving activities, activities in the creation of public spaces or hybrid activities in online space.

For a better understanding of the importance of problems in the field of project implementation in the conditions of third sector actors, it should be noted that, in Slovak conditions, support for NGO activities from public sources is often unsystematic, fast changing and fragmented in terms of sources of funding. Therefore, NGOs most often use small grant schemes of private companies (with the exception of NGOs that have the capacity to implement projects from state subsidy schemes or European structural and investment funds). The average share of annual expenses of NGOs in the sample, which is covered by external sources of funding, exceeds 80%.

The financial health of NGOs also worsened due to a decrease of their own income, which is declared by almost 40% of the responded NGOs (**Figure 3**). Again, we note that approximately one third of NGOs in the sample do not generate their own income at all. The pandemic particularly affected the own income of those NGOs that existed in a kind of "semi-commercial" mode and provided professional services for a fee at real market prices (e.g., children's camps, professional planning services, planting services, etc.). These initiatives most often had to re-focus on new activities. It is interesting that while the own incomes of most NGOs decreased, there are also examples, such as the case of artistic graphics sale, when the income of a given NGO did not decrease or even raised during the pandemic. Even bigger problem was the inability to effectively reinvest this income back into own activities of NGOs. Lockdowns caused a massive increase in sunk costs, which was declared by up to 45.5% of respondents. The highest sunk costs were generated by planned

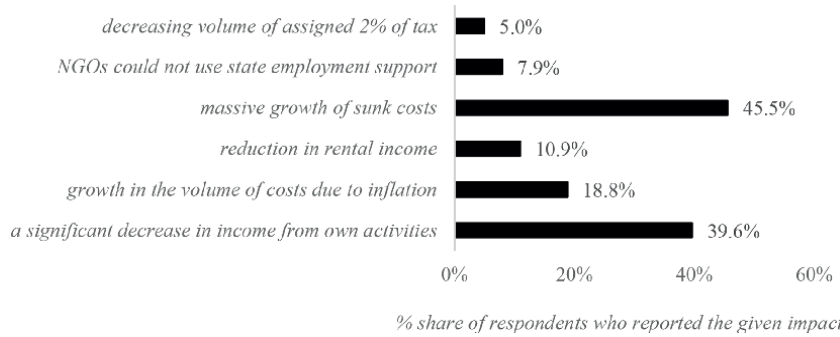

Figure 3.
Share of respondents perceiving negative impacts of pandemic in the field of financial health of the organization.

events, in which the resources were invested (costs of human capital, advances for renting equipment and premises, marketing costs, etc.), and which finally could not take place. Inflation has created another group of barriers associated with growth of prices. Inflation significantly affected activities of up to 18.8% of responded NGOs. Along with the increase in the prices of food and consumables, there was also a significant increase in real estate prices in Slovakia between 2020 and 2022. This trend was also reflected in the perceived increase in the prices of space rentals, while many NGOs operate on rent and do not have the resources to secure their own premises. Last but not the least, the state prepared several cycles of compensation programs during the pandemic to support the sustainability of employment during the pandemic. However, all these programs were limited to maintaining employment in the private sector.

From the conducted guided interviews, we can hypothesize that the degree of ability to maintain the provision of services and the implementation of ongoing projects in the time of crisis depend on a number of diverse factors. In the conditions of our sample, these factors mostly included:

- the nature of the activities and projects
- the degree of dependence of selected population groups on these activities and services
- the natural place for their implementation
- collaborative nature of the projects and existing networks
- own premises
- the degree of use of digital technologies
- previous experiences of communication with target groups online
- the ability of the community to support the NGO and provide it with additional resources
- level of dependence on external sources of funding
- level of income diversification

4. Resilience toward crises and adaptation strategies

The NGOs in Slovakia have demonstrated the ability to respond quickly and flexibly to widespread restrictions introduced due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This fact can be well supported by empirical evidence. However, this is no longer true in the case of assumptions about their natural resistance toward impacts of crises.

Using a quote from conducted interviews, the resilience of NGOs in the time of crisis results mainly from the fact that "*they are not market-based actors*." Under Slovak conditions, during the pandemic, businesses were mainly affected by factors such

as the impossibility of carrying out production activities in a physical environment, the reduction of demand on the sales markets, the inability to realize direct sales or provide services face-to-face, inflation connected with growing costs of inputs, the loss of suppliers within long value chains, impaired transport options and the impossibility of physical work within manufacturing and many others [16]. Certain impacts of uncertainty and inflation were also significantly perceived in the conditions of actors of the third sector, the importance of NGOs in times of crisis in many cases grows together with the growth of demand for the services provided by NGOs. Non-governmental organizations can also often choose more flexibly the mode of their provision.

At the same time, the third sector in Slovakia is largely dependent on external sources of funding. If the central government and self-governments are able to realize what social roles non-governmental organizations can play in times of crisis, support from external funding sources may even increase under certain circumstances (additional calls, modifications of calls and creation of new financing mechanisms for public benefit activities). In this context, it is necessary to realize that NGOs are a very heterogeneous group of actors, in which opportunities are not distributed evenly. Therefore, at the same time, in the conditions of various crises, certain NGOs may identify new opportunities, experience an increasing demand for their services or even a growth in the volume of available funding sources, while other NGOs do not. At least at the level of the central government in Slovakia, each department provides special support mechanisms for non-governmental organizations, which have different requirements and rules.

Another identified aspect of NGOs' resilience in times of crisis stems from the nature of activism. Social goals of NGOs change dynamically over time, but crises do not necessarily disrupt these goals. According to a respondent from an NGO that deals with the issue of climate change, non-governmental organizations cannot afford to "*waste time*" when building pressure to change policies. According to the statements of several respondents, NGOs in Slovakia drew attention to the neglect of important development topics as a result of the pandemic. The natural ability of NGOs to resist the impact of a crisis is therefore also formed by its value structure, the integrity of the community around the NGO, the attitudes and determination of volunteers and the ability of the community to support the institution in times of uncertainty with material or financial resources (besides voluntary work).

However, much more can be said about the adaptation strategies that NGOs tried to implement during the COVID-19 pandemic, given the rapidly changing operating conditions. In the previous chapter, we described extensive barriers to the development of NGO activities between 2020 and 2022. We have identified a very low number of NGOs that have terminated or fundamentally limited their activities, which is predominantly the result of the adaptation strategies that we tried to conceptualize based on the results of mass guided interviews. The result is our theoretical model of adaptation strategies, which is shown in **Figure 4**. In general, it was possible to identify three areas of adaptation tools utilized by non-governmental organizations in Slovakia, namely:

1. improvement of internal policies, strategic processes and capacity-building

2. creation of new programs and activities based on emerging opportunities

3. income diversification and community-based resource pooling

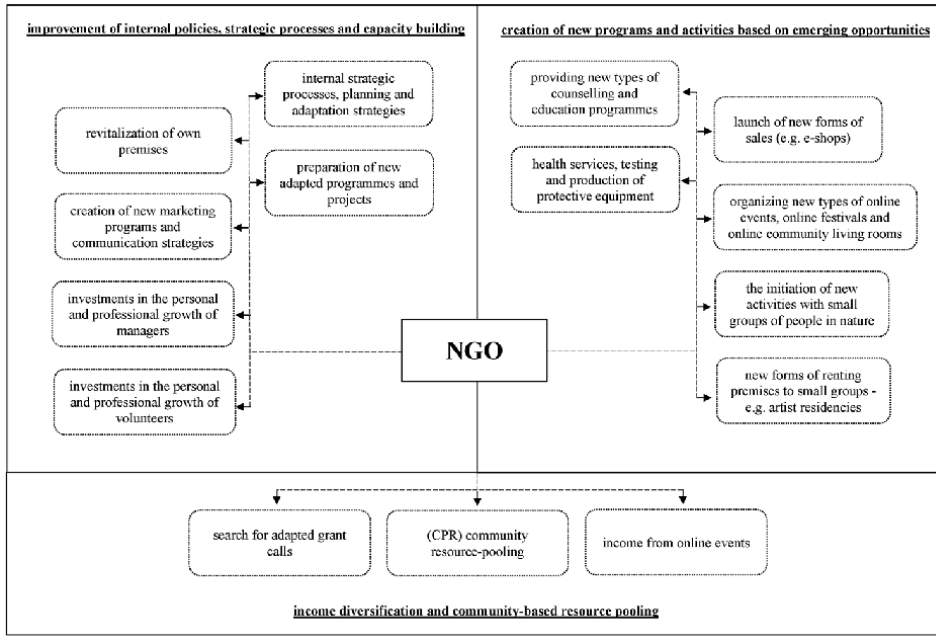

Figure 4.
Attributes of adaptation strategies implemented by NGOs in Slovakia during the period of COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022).

In **Figure 4**, we see within the individual "groups" individually identified measures and activities that were supposed to either help the initiative to "survive" or maintain dynamics in their own community. The first group is measures from the category "improvement of internal policies, strategic processes and capacity building." The majority of these activities or measures were implemented mainly as a result of the interruption of the implementation of ongoing projects, the suspension of the events or the inability to provide part of the services. Although the third sector experienced a difficult period, many NGOs gained the opportunity to rethink the future development of NGOs, to reassess their goals, to formulate new projects, to modify methods of planning and to rethink the models of resource utilization, or organization of voluntary work.

As many as 42 of the 101 responding NGOs declared that they invested a significantly increased amount of time in planning, especially during the years 2020 and 2021. At the same time, the majority of these 42 non-governmental organizations tried to use new planning models, to involve the community more significantly in planning processes or to use a more advanced methodology of common decision-making. The representatives of the four responded NGOs announced that, during the pandemic, their NGOs got the opportunity to create not only a short-term plan but also a fully professional, long-term and formal strategic document. Up to 35.6% of respondents invested the free time capacity of skilled human capital into the preparation of new project applications for non-refundable financial contributions. Community centers with physical space, on the other hand, organized small groups of volunteers who worked on the revitalization of premises, on the creation of new public spaces or on the development of community gardens, sports fields, and the like. Almost 28% of respondents declared work on the reconstruction of their own

real estates (either significant or do-it-yourself (DIY) upgrades), or the revitalization of outdoor green spaces.

At the same time, it was possible to use this period for strengthening one's own capacities. Capacity-building took place not only in the area of creating strategic plans but also through the creation of marketing campaigns or training the coordinators of activities and volunteers. Some NGOs (especially those operating in the sector of culture) declared that these activities could take place, thanks to the updates of eligible activities in ongoing calls from selected grant schemes. In this case, a good example is the prompt response of the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic and the Slovak Arts Council, which, thanks to modifications in their calls, enabled non-governmental organizations in culture to devote themselves fully to capacity-building during lock-downs. During the pandemic, up to 30% of the responding NGOs created a new complex marketing campaign, and 32% of the responding institutions declared strengthening the training of the internal team or volunteers. We were not fully able to properly map the ways in which the strengthening of education took place. However, it is possible to state that some NGOs also implemented internal training for volunteers, others involved volunteers in educational programs implemented by volunteering centers, or other NGOs through their educational programs. Managers received training mostly from external professionals online, while some NGOs were able to secure such a training for their managers from own funds.

The second group of measures involves "creation of new programs and activities based on emerging opportunities," as every crisis in case of any sector also stimulates certain opportunities that can be utilized. While in the case of private sector actors, we are talking about new opportunities to generate profit, in the case of non-governmental organizations, we are rather considering emerging opportunities to achieve their goals, to better address selected social challenges or to obtain additional own income to be reinvested in upcoming activities. The lockdown indeed also brought opportunities to actors of the third sector. Environmental protection activities experienced a renaissance during the pandemic. This is declared by several associations focused on nature protection, outdoor activities and especially community gardens. Some of the NGOs that are dedicated to this type of activity even declared a significant increase in the number of volunteers, users of new solutions or a rapid increase in followers on social networks. Those NGOs, which were dedicated to the development of waste collection and recycling, declared an increase in the number of public brigades, even if only in small work groups in accordance with valid government regulations. Increased demand was also experienced by community schools, online educational activities, awareness activities and online counseling provided by NGOs. Thus, a large volume of small-scale activities in nature or in the online space began to develop. Almost 50% of the responding NGOs delivered new educational programs during the pandemic. Almost 25% of the responding NGOs strengthened their activities in the field of improving the quality of the environment and nature conservation. In the field of community development and culture, online community living rooms began to emerge, where residents spent their free time and strengthened their relational health. A number of cultural events have moved to the online space, while artists have traditionally tried to support the population during the lockdown through live online performances. Due to the diverse nature of these online events and the different forms of their interactivity or integration within education, we cannot simply quantify the frequency of occurrence of such events in the sample. However, this is one of the most frequent reactions of NGOs to the impossibility of meeting with their community or target groups during the pandemic.

The NGOs were trying to diversify their income also through counseling and sale of new products. The creation of three different e-shops, which were supposed to provide additional income for the NGO, was identified. As a demonstration, one of the responding NGOs that focused on climate change issues opened an e-shop with literature on the topic and at the same time started publishing its own magazine or publications for children. Works of art sales were also stable during the pandemic in Slovakia. It became clear that knowledge is a very valuable and highly tradable asset of third sector actors. As many as 24.7% of NGOs in the sample state that they provided counseling services to other actors during the pandemic, while a considerable number of types and forms of such services were identified. Some NGOs declared that they carried out these activities reluctantly (especially when it came to consulting in the field of finance, accounting or taxes). Most often, NGOs in the sample provided consulting in the field of project management, strategic planning or NGO establishment.

A completely special category of new activities during the crisis is related to overcoming the pandemic. The share of respondent NGOs that carried out individual activities in the area of public health support and activities related to overcoming the crisis is shown in **Table 1**.

The importance of non-governmental organizations for the entire society grows in times of crisis, as these organizations tend to collaborate with central and local governments, or deliver solutions on their own, in order to mitigate negative impacts of the crisis. Almost 90% of respondents in the sample provided services that had to be provided only because of the onset of the pandemic. Some types of services aimed at overcoming the pandemic were significantly frequented in the sample. Among the most common, we can include the distribution of protective equipment and disinfection, or the provision of information about the development of the pandemic and regulatory measures to the target communities. However, as we can also see in **Table 1**, NGOs did meritorious work in the field of collection and production of protective materials, coordinating volunteers for mobile sampling sites or even directly provided testing services. Up to 28% of the responding NGOs in the sample implemented their own sample-collection points for testing with antigen tests, for which the NGOs gained at least some additional resources. However, up to six accredited,

Type of action	n	f
Distribution of protective equipment and disinfection	82	81,19%
Providing information about the development of the pandemic and regulatory measures to targeted communities	71	70,30%
Motivation of marginalized communities for vaccination (e.g., seniors, Roma)	46	45,54%
Collection and distribution of material needed during the pandemic (protective clothing, gloves, masks and respirators)	42	41,58%
Information campaigns for the public, leaflets or brochures	33	32,67%
Testing patients with antigen tests	29	28,71%
Sewing masks	29	28,71%
Increased support of marginalized communities with food and materials	19	18,81%
Low-threshold vaccination	6	5,94%

Table 1.
The share of respondent NGOs that carried out individual activities in the area of public health support and activities related to overcoming the crisis.

professional NGOs even performed low-threshold vaccination in marginalized communities or provided the necessary support for such vaccination. In this context, NGOs that provided health services to marginalized communities had the most challenging situation. In the case of employees and volunteers of these NGOs, permanent education and replacing exhausted or sick staff were required. Another issue was connected with finding ways to provide services, despite the fact that the restrictions often did not take into account the needs of the given marginalized communities.

In order to conclude interpretation of this group of adaptation strategy measures, it should be noted that NGOs in the sample were able to innovate, even during the pandemic. Our data from guided interviews were primarily aimed at identifying social innovations in community-led third sector institutions. Therefore, we have a relatively good overview of the innovative products and services that the NGOs in the sample delivered between 2020 and 2022. In these years, we identified that up to 35.6% of the actors in the sample identified themselves as innovators, while in most cases, thanks to the adaptation measures described above, the actors were able to complete the implementation of projects from before 2020 and start providing new, innovative services that are not indeed connected to onset of the pandemic (often in a limited form or in the online space). However, some of the introduced new services, or solutions in the sample represent a reaction to the new social situation caused by COVID-19 pandemic. We present selected examples of social innovations introduced as a result of the pandemic in **Table 2**.

Possibilities to adapt to the changing conditions of carrying out own activities were in certain cases bounded to limited resources. Within the third group of adaptation measures, we can observe how NGOs dealt with the situation of worsened access to external funding sources and with declining own incomes. The first of these measures related to the search of quickly adapted grant calls, which enabled capacity-building of NGOs to survive the unfavorable situation. In some cases, NGOs tried to gain access to purpose-bonded subsidies from local self-governments, but this was not possible in many localities due to strained relations between the mayor and representatives of non-governmental organizations. However, if it was not possible to cover up resource shortfalls from external funding sources, NGOs had to strengthen ties within their own community and ask the community for support. Community-led NGO organizations in Slovakia know how to pool private funding sources. This type of financing,

Introduced social innovation	Actor	Period of implementation
Zero waste recipe for waste-free cooking	Free Food	2020
Introduction of eco-social innovations in the community garden, expanding the number of barbecue pits and live performances online	Hidepark	2020–2021
Introduction of new models of utilization of the own premises— use of minimum allowed quotas for physical space use for artist residencies	Záhrada	2020–2021
Introduction of an e-shop with ecological literature and their own magazine	Strom života	2021
Concerts for the neighbors under the window. Neighborhood co-work was founded as a result of the pandemic.	Poď na dvor	2021

Table 2.
Examples of social innovations that emerged due to opportunities evoked by COVID-19 pandemic.

which can be described as community-based resource pooling, includes the integration of resources from the tax assignation to the non-governmental organization, together with public collections and crow-funding calls, auctions, donations or possible membership fees (which, however, they usually did not introduce NGOs in the sample).

The last option for income diversification was related to the provision of new services in the online space. These services did not always have to be just a commercial relationship of service provision. In selected cases, NGOs tried to connect community-based resource pooling, for example, with the organization of online events, when the event was supposed to become a source of donation.

5. Discussion and conclusions

As in the conditions of other Central European countries, the majority of investigated community-led non-governmental organizations in Slovakia were not existentially threatened due to the negative effects of restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic [2, 21]. The impacts of the pandemic on the ability of NGOs to survive, to maintain their activities and to pool resources appear to be similar to the conditions of European and third countries [17–20]. Our results confirm that the adaptation measures had to be directed mainly to maintain ties with the own community [19], to ensure the completion of the implementation of started projects [17] and to deal with deepening financial shortfalls [18]. We hypothesize that these patterns of similarity of pandemic impacts are due to similar patterns of lockdowns that individual countries have implemented. Even in Slovakian conditions, NGOs had to reduce the number of employees [20]; however, this did not represent a single and fundamental impact of the pandemic in the field of operation and management of the initiatives. NGOs had to deal with the burnout of employees and managers, a high rate of contagion in target groups, a decreasing number of volunteers and the inability to organize in-person activities and provide in-field services.

Our results indicate that NGOs can be considered as an actor that has irreplaceable, natural social functions in relation to managing and overcoming crises [14, 15]. NGOs fulfilled their core societal missions to an even greater extent during the pandemic [9]. However, in order to overcome the mentioned negative effects of the crisis, they had to introduce various organizational and process changes, which we understand as adaptation measures in our study. There were already some efforts to describe how NGOs adapted to impacts of uncertainty and fast-changing conditions caused by lockdowns during COVID-19 pandemic [18, 23, 24]. However, we tried to conceptualize elements of such adaptation strategies that NGOs combined within their institution-specific conditions. These were classified under three categories: (1) improvement of internal policies, strategic processes and capacity-building, (2) creation of new programs and activities based on emerging opportunities and (3) income diversification and community-based resource pooling. NGOs looked for opportunities to reorient themselves to new types of activities and to obtain additional income.

The crises caused a wide spectrum of emerging social challenges, which NGOs in our sample often addressed more flexibly than central or local governments [9]. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, NGOs in Slovakia were able to provide a number of services to strengthen public health and safety—from the production of protective materials, through the establishment of mobile sample-collection centers, to low-threshold vaccination for marginalized communities. Concerning the original societal missions of investigated NGOs, it was shown that they were able to transfer the

activities to the online space, maintain strong ties within their own communities and deliver new projects and activities aimed at strengthening the well-being and physical or mental health in the community and target groups. When trying to support their original social missions or support the well-being of their target communities, NGOs in Slovakia continued to generate social innovations, even in the form of a pandemic. Almost half of the NGOs in our sample delivered new innovative services between 2020 and 2022. The decline in activity in the area of implementing large-scale projects brought an opportunity to develop more volunteer-based activities that could be carried out within the limits of restrictions. Some NGOs used the opportunity to strengthen capacity-building processes and were able to diversify human, financial and material resources for planned activities. Here, we came to a point, where we can agree with some previous results [2, 22, 24] that some NGOs are more sensitive toward impacts of the crises than others. In case of Slovakia, the pandemic hit hardest NGOs, which are dedicated to social and health services or production of events in culture. The activities in the field of education and awareness building, or climate change and natural conservation, were the least affected in line with literature [21].

The NGOs fulfilled their core societal missions to an even greater extent during the pandemic. However, it can be noted that the compensation of budget shortfalls in case of certain NGOs in the sample interfered with the original missions of NGO [3], which had to deliver new services provided on commercial markets. However, this was a way how the non-governmental organizations demonstrated the ability to overcome the negative effects of restrictions and adapt to changing conditions during the pandemic, despite the fact that the third sector actors had no access to key compensation tools of the government—for example, the compensation for lost profit or compensations aimed to support job retention.

There are still a number of issues that are not sufficiently discussed in the literature on the topic. The scientific literature lacks quantitative studies that would accurately name the effects of specific restrictions during the pandemic on the ability of NGOs to provide their socially beneficial services. At the same time, we still do not know how the NGOs were influenced by the worsened operating conditions of the other spatial actors. Were the collaborative ties of NGOs significantly disrupted in the external environment? Did the worsened economic results of enterprises cause a decrease in revenues from tax assignment in the case of NGOs? Our research shows that a number of NGOs introduced new innovative services during the pandemic or invested in the development of activities related to overcoming the effects of the pandemic. However, it is questionable how sustainable these activities are since 2022, in the period of regeneration of natural socioeconomic processes. Empirical studies are also expected, which would clarify what role NGOs played in the processes of regeneration of social life after the end of the pandemic period.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Section 3

NGOs in Developing Countries

Chapter 7

The Role of NGOs in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 Pandemic Followed by the Floods in the Northern Districts

Syed Abu Hasnath and Shahadat Baser

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh during 2020–2022 caused a severe health crisis and unprecedented economic disruptions, with millions of job losses. These issues were exacerbated by the two unprecedented flash floods in mid-2022 in the northeastern districts of Sylhet and Sunamgonj, making the country recovering from the pandemic more vulnerable. The situation required an effective collective response from governmental and civil society organizations, including local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs and INGOs), to provide millions of affected people with affordable healthcare and offer shelter to the seven million-plus displaced flood victims. This chapter provides an in-depth discussion on the role and performance of some NGOs and INGOs and a few selected corporate and civil society organizations, frequently organized as foundations, in providing medical supplies, food, and finance, as well as material and emotional support to the victims. As will be shown, small NGOs were, in some cases, instrumental in saving the lives of hundreds of people during these turbulent times. While this does not undermine the key role of large national and international NGOs, we recommend providing more international aid to bigger and smaller grassroots NGOs. These entities should also be given greater governmental support to ensure that such initiatives fully benefit the communities in need.

Keywords: Bangladesh, COVID-19, floods, government, INGOs, NGOs, pandemic

1. Introduction

This chapter provides a snapshot of the role and performance of international and national NGOs during recent turbulent times in Bangladesh caused by the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2020 to July 2022 (hereafter denoted as "pandemic") and the devastating floods in Sylhet and Sunamgonj districts (in the northeastern region of

Bangladesh) during mid-2022.[1] Owing to their ubiquitous presence in Bangladesh since independence in 1971, NGOs in Bangladesh played a substantial role in the preparedness response and impact mitigation to lessen the consequences of these crises. For a comprehensive analysis of the origin, growth, and development of NGOs in Bangladesh, see Baser and Hasnath [1].

2. Literature review

While the role of NGOs as critical change agents in promoting socioeconomic development during peacetime is recognized and documented in the extant literature [2], their role in the turbulent period, including the COVID-19 pandemic, is also acknowledged in society and by the government. Several scholarly publications have analyzed the NGOs' role during the pandemic, including (a) testing and treating infection, (b) giving food and cash to vulnerable families, (c) educating the public about the impacts of COVID-19, and (d) obtaining resources to respond to the pandemic [3].

In their extensive research on the impacts of pandemics in fourteen Central and East European countries, Nemeanu Sefora and Dan Dabija have discerned from the first image that NGOs have proven their essential role in supporting vulnerable groups within communities. The other findings in their illustrative study [4]:

- The pandemic pushed the boundaries of the healthcare system and the availability of necessary resources to secure a livelihood.
- NGO's role in providing social and humanitarian aid is important in areas where the government or the market has failed.
- The best practice of NGOs has been redefining their relationship with public institutions; they have become more cooperative, informal, and reciprocal.
- NGOs depend on public funding, without which they cannot achieve their goal. They actively collaborate with sponsors and community organizations for fundraising campaigns aimed at obtaining resources to assist socially vulnerable groups—older people and people with preexisting medical conditions.

Sayarifard et al. conducted a study in Iran to identify the activities of NGOs in response to the challenges confronted by the nation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors' first impression was—and that lasted well over the end—that the spread and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic were of such magnitude that to shape an effective, collective response, the government required the participation of and cooperation of civil society organizations and institutions, including NGOs. The study identified NGOs' role in effectively providing services to the target group in the COVID-19 crisis and interacting with governmental and nongovernmental agencies [5].

[1] The floods in Bangladesh (June–July 2022) also engulfed other districts, including Habigonj, Moulvibazar, Netrokona, Kurigrm, and Lalmonirhat in the northern region. However, Sylhet and Sunamgonj's situation was more challenging (see **Figure 2**).

Zohra Shamim's book chapter on the role of two NGOs—Bangladesh Rural Development Committee (BRAC) and the French Medical NGO Medicins du Monde (MdM)—analyzes the structures and activities of those two NGOs during the COVID-19 era. The NGOs worked in Bangladesh and other countries, including Afghanistan, Malaysia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Philippines, Nepal, and Myanmar. Zohra firmly concludes, "NGOs play a vital role, especially during global challenges such as a pandemic when national governments cannot fulfill the population's needs alone" [6].

We concur with all the above conclusions, including Zohra's emphasis on the role of NGOs. We have critically analyzed the role of NGOs, INGOs, CSR faith-based organizations, and youth volunteer groups, and we have reached the same conclusion that they substantially augment the role of the government in meeting the enormous challenges of the pandemic and floods in Bangladesh.

In another study on the impact of COVID-19 in Nigeria, Ikenna Elias Asogwa et al. found a decline in health-seeking behaviors and low program implementation while increasing efficiency through virtual innovations and network development. In the case of Bangladesh, we did not observe any such decline but found evidence of an increase in efficiency and prompt adaptation to the crisis [7].

India went one step ahead of other countries in celebrating the role of Indian NGOs and INGOs in combating the COVID-19 pandemic. The NITI Aayog (National Institution for Transforming India (former Planning Commission of India) reached out to 90,000 NGOs and civil society organizations from the beginning of the pandemic to seek assistance in delivering services to the poor and sick people, as well as health and community workers [8].

3. The context of the turbulent period

We begin this discussion by briefly reviewing the context of the turbulent period in the focus of this analysis, commencing with the impact of the pandemic on life (morbidity and death) and living (income loss due to lockdown effects), followed by the consequences of flash floods.

Although the chapter's central focus is the role and performance of NGOs as valuable intermediaries between the three main sectors of the economy—the public, private, and civil society, we consider the contributions of some select corporations, religious organizations (or faith-based organizations), and youth groups (or clubs), as well as the government's response to these crises to ensure people's safety and wellness. These analyses are based on a qualitative study involving field observations by the authors and evaluation of newspaper stories and editorials, journal articles, reports, blogs, and videos that provided acceptable evidence on how people viewed the two turbulent situations and enabled us to determine who contributed and how much.

3.1 COVID-19 pandemic

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic was first detected in late December 2019 in Wuhan, China. In the following months, the pandemic spread all over the world. The first three cases in Bangladesh were identified in Dhaka on March 8, 2020. Soon after, the pandemic spread all over the country. The capital region, Dhaka, and the second city region, Chittagong, bore the brunt of severe

infections, many of which had fatal outcomes (see **Figure 1**: regional distribution of COVID-19 cases and **Table 1**: cases of COVID-19 infection in top 10 districts in Bangladesh)

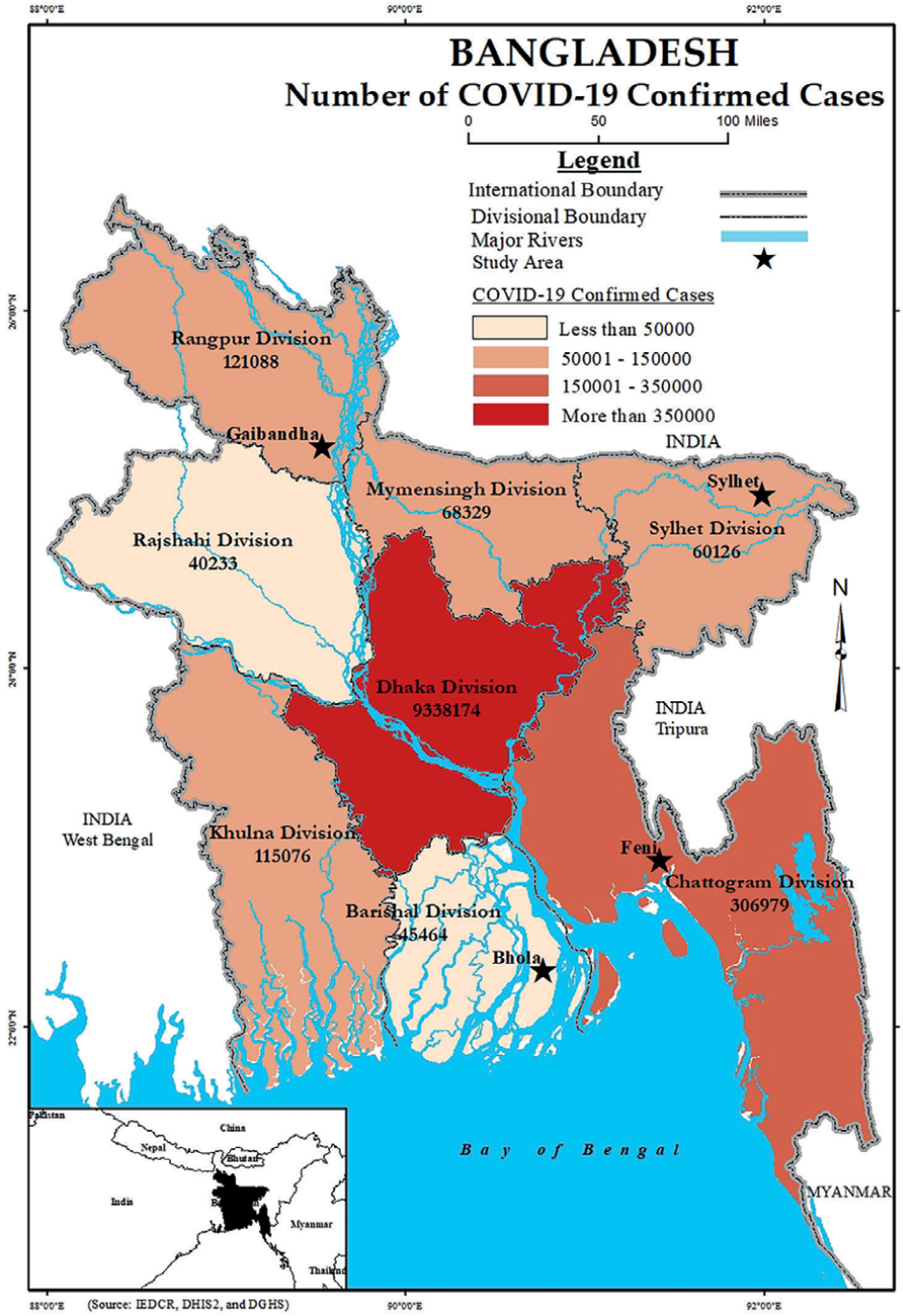

Figure 1.
Geographical distribution of COVID-19 confirmed cases in Bangladesh.

Sl. no.	District name	No. of confirmed cases
1.	Dhaka	713,085
2.	Chittagong	127,925
3.	Comilla	469,92
4.	Sylhet	37,697
5.	Narayanganj	36419
6.	Gazipur	35,001
7.	Coxs Bazar	33,834
8.	Faridpur	30,471
9.	Rajshahi	28,938

Source: https://dashboard.dghs.gov.bd/pages/covid19.php

Table 1.
Number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the top 10 districts in Bangladesh from March 2020 to July 2022.

The majority (72%) of the deceased were male, likely because they were still going out to work to earn a living, while most women remained at home and were thus less exposed to the virus. Among the age groups, the most significant mortality rate (70%+), as expected, was recorded among those aged 50 and above, and rural areas (60%) were more severely affected than urban areas (40%). A higher mortality rate was expected in rural areas with limited access to healthcare facilities compared to urban areas.

3.2 The devastating floods in Sylhet and Sunamgonj

While Sylhet and Sunamgong ranked fourth among the districts in Bangladesh regarding the number of registered COVID-19 cases, the devastating floods—the worst in 122 years—exacerbated this crisis (see **Figure 2** and **Table 1**)

According to the government-issued data (the actual number may be greater), at least 141 people were killed in floods, and nearly 7.5 million people were left homeless, and thus in desperate need of shelter and aid. These extreme weather events were attributed to climate change as the Jamuna and Brahmaputra rivers swelled and India opened Teesta river (Gajoldoba) barrage gates.

The floods caused substantial damage to physical infrastructure as 528 km of roads, eight bridges, many culverts, and parts of a railway track were either destroyed or required considerable reparation. Osmani International Airport in Sylhet was submerged under water, while 60% of houses, water supply, and sanitation were fully or partially damaged. About half a million displaced people took shelter in 1605 government shelter centers, and others were placed in vacant school buildings, mosques, and disaster relief tents. Flood victims lost their household assets and part of their livestock, poultry, and fisheries. Some also contracted water-borne diseases, including diarrhea and fever, or exhibited other health problems.

While providing the much-needed temporary accommodation, flood shelters also made women vulnerable, as many were pregnant, and some gave birth without adequate privacy or access to primary and maternity healthcare. The safety of (young) women and adolescent girls was also in jeopardy, as did the incidences of early marriage.

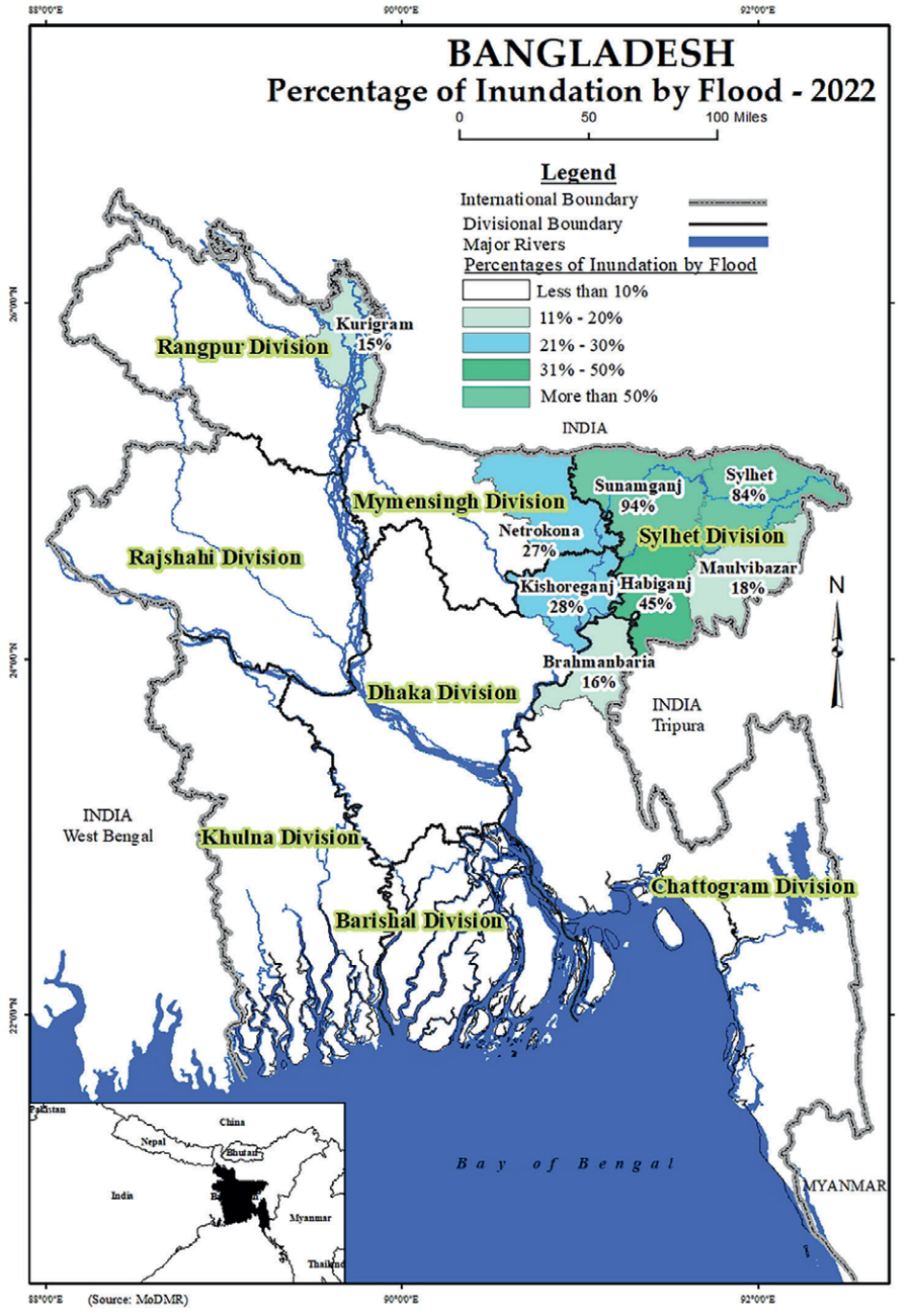

Figure 2.
Flood-affected areas of Bangladesh 2022.

4. Theoretical background and analytical framework

This section commences with a brief introduction to the origin, growth, and development of NGOs from international and national (Bangladeshi) perspectives, including their role in relief operations and sustainable development. In seeking to interpret the idea of NGOs, we draw upon the government's political philosophy dedicated to reducing income inequality and increasing access to public goods with the help of NGOs and civil society organizations.[2]

The appeal of NGO theory in this context stems from three primary sources: First, not all people are "poor, nasty, and brutish" in the Hobbesonian state and are not always driven by personal gain. There are rich in developed countries and wealthy people in less developed countries willing to share part of their wealth for the greater good of humanity, irrespective of differences in geography and religion. Second, since absolute economic equality is not possible—though it may be desirable for an ideally just state of John Rawls—society will be better off if the efforts focus on realizing equitable income distribution and thereby minimizing inequality following Sen's *Idea of Justice* [9].

Third, some people arguably possess altruistic traits and can help others in distress. They may have expectations of material or emotional (or both) rewards in return. The government can provide those organizations with funding and access to fundamental services (infrastructure), scale their operations, and increase their reach, particularly the guidance they need during turbulent times in the country. The role of NGOs corporate social responsibility (CSR), philanthropic civil society organizations, and aid from international donor agencies can help reduce inequality.

These theoretical principles are realized in practice in Bangladesh, where there are 26,000+ registered and many unregistered NGOs. We present some prominent INGOs and NGOs that have, over the years, contributed funds, food, and medical supplies to meet the critical needs of Bangladeshi people affected by adversities while increasing public awareness of the importance of healthcare. We focus on the most representative case studies about Gonosasthaya Kendra (GK), Dhaka Community Hospital Trust (DCHT), Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Association for Social Advancement (ASA), Shakti Foundation (SF), and Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB), an apex NGO body. The case studies on INGOs include CARE, UNICEF, Oxfam, and Red Crescent. These analyses are complemented by an evaluation of the work of the Basundharaa group (conglomerate) during the pandemic and floods. Lastly, we include three selected civil society organizations:

- Samaj Kliyan Sangstha (SKS) in Gaibandha is a healthcare NGO (nonprofit organization for healthcare equity) located in the northern region (**Figure 3**).

[2] The NGO sector in Bangladesh is an inseparable part of Bangladesh's history. Three NGOs—the Gonoshasthaya Kendra (GK), Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (RRAC), and Grameen Bank (Village Bank)—came into being in the early years of independence (1971 onward). They retained the top spots in development literature for their contributions to low-cost public health (GK), rural development (small nonformal education programs for the poverty-stricken rural people (BRAC), and microcredit (providing small loans for the rural poor, particularly for empowering poor women (Grameen Bank). For details, see our previous work [1].

- Khalifa Patti Mosque is a faith-based organization in Bhola (southern region) dedicated to welfare activities.

- Local Youth Organizations in Feni, Sylhet, and Sunamgonj are volunteer clubs that operated during the pandemic and floods (see asterisk (*) mark in **Figure 1**).

When examining these cases, we used the analytical guidelines suggested by the Editorial Board of the Encyclopedia on *Natural Hazards and Disasters*. We discussed the role of NGOs from the perspective of their founding, development, fundamental principles, and source(s) of funding [10, 11].

Ahmed, Mussarat, and Zarina developed another set of criteria in their framework for analyzing the role of NGOs during turbulent periods, which appears to be a novel and more contextual approach to our discussion. The elements of the framework are briefly outlined below [12].

Compassion. The ability of the NGO staff to empathize with the poor and needy enables NGOs to deliver aid to those in need. Empathy also empowers NGO leaders with a positive image and goodwill.

Resource pooling. NGOs must have the resources—funding, materials, information, and sharing facilities such as joint transport, office space, and relationships with the government—that can be utilized when required.

Collaboration and *coordination*. NGOs' actions are often hindered by a lack of coordination and cooperation, resulting in multiple parallel projects and duplication of services, decreasing the effectiveness of the available resources.

Communication. Effective communication with donors, beneficiaries, the government, and the wider public is the key to the success of NGOs.

Figure 3.
SKS Hospital in Gaibandha, Bangladesh. Source https://www.sks-bd.org/index.php/about-det.

These components complement each other, ensuring the successful operation of NGOs and INGOs.

In this chapter, we also consider the charitable giving by some large corporations, as well as initiatives championed by young students by volunteering time, money, transport, and whatever resources they had to help the victims of pandemics and floods.

In the following section, we briefly outline the role of the government before turning our focus to some selected NGOs. Then, we examine corporate social responsibility (CSR) and civil society organizations' roles during turbulent times.

5. Role of the government

The government of Bangladesh received funds from the USA and USA-based international agencies to respond to the pandemic. The World Bank approved emergency financing of $100 million, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) disbursed $732 million, and the USA donated $132.4 million, in addition to 10 million doses of Pfizer's Covid-19 vaccine. Combined with the government's resources and NGOs cooperation, this gift from the American people ensured that the frontline health workers could access critical supplies such as ventilators, oxygen concentrators, hospital beds, and personal protective equipment (PPE). Still, despite all these efforts, the facilities were inadequate for meeting the extensive needs of COVID-19 patients in large numbers, due to which many critically ill individuals were denied entry to the hospital, let alone testing and treatment.

Some may argue that facilities were inadequate due to imprudent government spending as a significant portion of available finances was designated for business enterprises to keep the economy going.

However, as shown in **Table 2**, the number of deaths from COVID-19 in Bangladesh was much lower than in most countries. Likewise, while most national economies faced a recession in 2020, the GDP growth in Bangladesh experienced an initial setback but recovered in the following years. Business leaders credit the private sector for the economy's resilience, while critics say that the government was overgenerous in supporting the private sector with public funds. Both views can be actual.

Immediately after the flash floods, the government (as duty-bound) deployed the army and navy for rescue operations and relief distribution (**Figure 4**). The Prime Minister immediately allocated Tk. 1.2 crores for Sylhet-Sunamgonj and further Tk.

Country	Person per '000	Country	Person per '000
Peru	9.4	Sri Lanka	0.73
USA	3.6	Nepal	0.40
UK	3.5	India	0.38
Italy	3.3	Bangladesh	0.16
Mexico	2.6	Pakistan	0.13

Source: compiled by authors from various published materials.

Table 2.
Death due to COVID-19 per 1000 population.

Figure 4.
Bangladesh air force distributes relief in flood-affected areas of Sylhet. Source: https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/bangladesh-air-force-distributes-relief-flood-affected-areas-sylhet-44356.

6.5 million for the surrounding subdivisions in the Haor (bowl-shaped back swamp) region. Following the Prime Minister's visit to the flood site on June 19, 2022, additional funding (Tk. 2.5 crores) and packages with rice, pulses, dry food, clean water, water purification tablets, and emergency medicines were delivered to the devastated communities. The government arranged shelter centers for the flood victims and moved over 472,000 individuals to 1,605 shelter centers. The Palli Karma-Sahayak (Rural Employment Help) Foundation (PKSF) also stepped in with Tk. 2 crore to help flood victims. PKSF is a national public sector direct access entity based in Bangladesh working on a sustainable platform for collaboration between government and non-government organizations.[3]

Following the war of independence in 1971, Bangladesh became a popular site for NGOs. Since independence, three prominent—and highly respected—NGOs have become valuable partners in the government's journey to rebuild and develop the country—the Grameen Bank (internationally known for microcredit), Gonosasthya Kendra (for low-cost health services), and BRAC (for microcredit, informal primary education for social empowerment of rural women). The government of Bangladesh took over the Grameen Bank in 2012. Below is a concise introduction to Gonosasthya Kendra and BRAC and their role in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and the ravages of floods.

5.1 Role of NGOs case studies

5.1.1 Gonosasthaya Kendra (GK)

See **Figure 5**.

The GK was founded as Bangladesh Field Hospital with 480 beds during the liberation war (between March 1971 and December 1971) against the occupation army of Pakistan. Dr. Chowdhury and the hospital received a land grant from the government of Bangladesh, generous support from foreign governments, including France and the Netherlands, and donor agencies, such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and Global Giving. He and GK also received

[3] Tk. (Taka) is the name of the Bangladeshi currency. The exchange rate during 2020–2022 was US $1 = Tk. 85. 1 crore = 10 million.

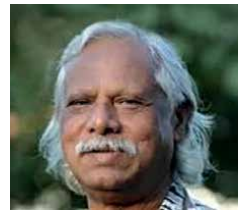

Figure 5.
Dr. Zafrullah Chowdhury. A patriot and the founder of Gonosasthaya Kendra, a comprehensive primary healthcare NGO (December 27, 1941–April 11, 2023).

many prestigious international awards, including the Philippines Magsaysay Award and the Swsweden Right Livelihood Award. In his acceptance speech for the Award, Dr. Chowdhury briefly outlined GK as follows:

> *Gonoshasthaya Kendra was established in Savar in 1972 to deliver integrated health care in rural areas. The mainstay of GK's healthcare delivery system is a team of paramedics (barefoot doctors), primarily young rural women. Health services have reached rural homes through them, and poor people have gained access to medical services, health education, and essential drugs. Each paramedic is responsible for 3,000 people for whom they provide a wide range of basic health services. They register births and deaths, identify high-risk pregnancies, provide ante-natal and post-natal care, immunize, treat common ailments like diarrhea, scabies, and acute respiratory infections, provide health and nutrition education, and teach the preparation of oral rehydration saline. They also perform minor surgery and take care of normal births. They have referral links to secondary care clinics and GK's hospital [13].*

Gonoshasthaya Kendra was registered as a Public Charitable Trust in 1972. Since then, it has been the top health-related NGO in Bangladesh, with 2500 employees, including doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and administrative staff. With that strength and capacity, GK has tried its best to respond to the needs of both the pandemic and the floods. True to its ideology, GK worked from the start of the pandemic.

Its first task was to prepare and supply a rapid coronavirus test kit, for which they needed experts from abroad. They took other measures, including emergency blood management services, community-based hand washing, sanitizer supplies, and leaflets and posters for awareness. GK's other services include providing cooked food for 100,000+ low-income families, which has continued throughout the pandemic.

Yet, when the unprecedented floods occurred, one of the members of Bangladesh's National Disaster Management Council, GK, responded immediately and reached the flood-affected area of Sylhet and Sunamgonj within 48 h. Its staff joined the rescue operations while providing 100 metric tons of food, clean water, and water purification tablets to the stranded people. Two GK medical teams were deployed—one in Sylhet, another in Sunamgonj—and worked day and night, backed by truckloads of relief materials. GK also closely coordinated with the government administration, other NGOs, the UN, and other humanitarian donors, such as the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK). A brief review of GK's sources of income is provided below:

> *Although fees are minimal, GK earns revenues from two leading and five secondary hospitals in Dhaka city and its suburbs at Savar—and nearly 40 health centers*

> *spread all over the country. GK's Savar Kidney Dialysis is the largest in the country, and an open heart surgery unit has been completed. In addition, the organization maintains a certain level of self-reliance by engaging in more commercial activities—such as the People's Pharmaceutical Industry, Gonosasthya Textile Mill, Gonosasthya Printing Press, and the Gonosasthya University to become less dependent on donors [1].*

5.1.2 Bangladesh Rural Development Committee (BRAC)

BRAC is a highly esteemed NGO—defined by others as an international development organization—based in Bangladesh but works in several other countries. Sir Fazle Hasan Abed (1936–2019) founded the organization in 1972 to provide equal access to basic needs to underprivileged people in Bangladesh and elsewhere. In other words, BRAC's mission is to make provision for people and communities affected by poverty, disease, illiteracy, and social injustice. Specifically, BRAC's objective is to improve the rural poor's living conditions and support women's empowerment by using tools such as microfinance, nonformal education, healthcare knowledge, and raising societal awareness of the democratic rights and obligations of all individuals.

From the outset of the pandemic, 35,000 BRAC community workers were deployed to the frontline to respond to the challenge by distributing masks. Amid the high demand for face masks, BRAC trained women in the Rohingya refugee settlement camp to make face masks, allowing them to supply 30,000 covers per week. Through this initiative, BRAC administered millions of masks during the pandemic, and the Rohingya women got temporary employment to earn a living.[4]

Through its Community Fort for Resisting COVID-19 (CFRC) project, BRAC health workers reached 81 million people in 35 districts of Bangladesh—from Rajshahi in the north to Barisal in the south. The health workers went directly to homes in their communities and educated the household members on how to stay safe by using face masks, washing hands, and observing social distancing. The $1.5 million donation from Canada helped boost the morale of the CFRC program while aiding the provision of free telemedicine services and other resilience-building activities.

BRAC's flood response in Sylhet and Sunamgong was prompt, extensive, and practical—it launched an immediate relief operation by boat in the worst affected areas with lifesaving assistance to 52,000 families. BRAC allocated more than Tk. 30 million from its fund and distributed money and materials it received from overseas governments and donor agencies. The money was used to organize rescue services and provide emergency food relief, safe drinking water, saline solution, matches, candles, essential medicines, and other services to people affected by floods.

BRAC's relief work was very systematic. First, one of the team members assessed the situation to determine the number of affected people and their immediate needs. Then, relief goods and services were delivered in close cooperation with the army, District Administration, and other NGOs to avoid duplication and chaos. However,

[4] In August 2017, state-sponsored armed attacks and massive-scale violence forced the one million+ Rohingya population of Myanmar's Rakhine State to enter Bangladesh to save lives. Since then, they have lived in Cox's Bazar—mostly in Kutupalong refugee camp—a border region between Bangladesh and Myanmar. They depend entirely on the Bangladeshi government's support and humanitarian assistance from UN bodies, which are accompanied by significant United States donations. Nevertheless, they have a congested slum-like settlement with no future on the horizon (**Figure 6**).

BRAC's Upzila (an administrative sub-unit of district administration) was directly responsible for the relief and rehabilitation operations and field office monitoring.

All this was possible because BRAC is a wealthy organization. In addition to a dozen social enterprises, BRAC has four (for-profit) business organizations—BRAC Bank, BRAC IT Service Company, 26% share in EDOTCO (a telecommunication infrastructure network with 15,000 towers), and BRAC University. Although it focuses on building resources across the local communities, BRAC receives most of its donations abroad. Thus, the European Union, the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the United States (through USAID), the Australian and Canadian Governments, and the World Bank all came forward with generous donations supporting BRAC's efforts.

5.1.3 A brief look at the other notable NGOs in Bangladesh

At least a dozen other NGOs have worked in Bangladesh for over four decades but—except the Association for Social Advancement (ASA), Shakti Foundation (for Women Empowerment), and the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society—were almost absent during the pandemic or the Sylhet-Sunamgonj floods. Thus, this section focuses on these three noble organizations.

ASA handed over 4000 bags of food, including rice, lentils, potatoes, salt, and edible oil, to Dr. Benjir Ahmed, the Inspector General of Police, for distribution to the flood victims. During the pandemic, the organization provided 160 tons of food and Tk. 10 crores in financial assistance to low-income families.

Shakti Foundation faced economic distress during the pandemic but responded to the crisis by raising funds from the private sector, including commercial banks (e.g., Pubali Bank donated Tk. 2.5 million), allowing the Foundation to support 2000+ families in six districts—including three metropolitan areas of Bangladesh—with essential food items—and carried out the awareness rising program named My Mask My Protection [14].

Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (*BRCDS*), an auxiliary of the Government of Bangladesh, contributed substantially to minimizing the spread of the pandemic and the recovery of infected people. The BRCDS prepared and distributed nationwide information, education, and communication (I.E.C.) materials (posters, leaflets, and public health information). This initiative allowed thousands of volunteers to reach millions with I.E.C. messages. The BRCDS also opened blood donation and regular blood transfusion centers countrywide and was actively involved in PPE distribution, helping protect medical staff and patients. Sadly, despite these efforts, over 180 doctors and at least 360 nurses and other medical staff died on duty during the pandemic.

Many other less-known NGOs such as An Organization for Social Development (AOSED), Bangladesh Environment and Development Society (BEDS), and Sajida (prostrate in prayers) Foundation, to name a few, also worked tirelessly during this turbulent period for Bangladesh. They disseminated health information and provided food, medicine, hygiene kits, and sometimes cash support to vulnerable communities. A few of these cases are discussed below.

Dhaka Community Medical College (*DCMC*), an establishment of Dhaka Community Hospital Trust (DCHT), deserves special mention for three reasons:

- DCMC's working areas were slums in Dhaka, the highest-risk area and the most vulnerable community living in high-density small shelters (900+ persons per acre) with minimal access to municipal services.

- DCMC prepared a feature film on COVID-19 exhibited in slum areas to educate the residents on the nature of the disease and the measures they can take to protect themselves from infection. In addition, the college had set up a separate COVID-19 testing center in the corner of the hospital for treating infected patients.

- The founders of DCHT—two highly qualified medical doctors, Professor Kazi Qamruzzaman and Professor Mahmudur Rahman—exemplified the valuable role health NGOs can play in Bangladesh. Under a public-private partnership, they founded a 250-bed specialized community hospital in Pabna for the advanced treatment of cardiothoracic patients. During the pandemic, they handed the hospital to the government and resumed its normal operations once the infection rates abated [15].

SKS Foundation (Samaj Kallyan Sanstha or Social Welfare Foundation) is a renowned NGO in Gaibandha in northern Bangladesh, covering service areas in 20 other districts. It was founded in 1987 with the challenging goals of social empowerment, economic development of the poor, environmental justice for all, and social enterprises. With an annual budget of Tk. Fifteen billion and above, its income sources include a four-star hotel and resort, microcredit for agriculture and livestock rearing, and SKS Hospital as a social business enterprise.

The first author's close friend—a retired civil servant and Gaibandha's son—spoke to the authors about the role of SKS during the razes of pandemics, stating:

> *S.K.S. did an excellent job during the pandemic, which could hardly be found in the private sector. It opened an Isolation Center with 100+ beds for corona patients who were locally poor and helpless—and had nowhere to go. S.K.S. gave them free treatment and supplied hundreds of patients with food and clothes when they left the hospital. The hospital was fully equipped with medical supplies for coronavirus treatment, including oxygen cylinders and trained medical personnel. SKS shares resources with 18 other NGOs, including CARE Bangladesh, Oxfam, PKSF, and Water Aid Bangladesh, and shares information with the Government [16].*

5.2 Case studies of INGOs

Before discussing the role of INGOs in Bangladesh, we should first recognize the enormous contribution of the western democracies, including the United States and the European Union (EU), followed by the World Bank, during the turbulent period for Bangladesh caused by the pandemic and the floods. The U.S. government gave $56.5 million, including $38 million from USAID, in humanitarian assistance to Bangladesh. Bangladesh was also the largest recipient of US-donated 61 million (Pfizer) doses of COVID-19 vaccines that saved millions of lives from infection and death. The EU provided EUR 100,000 (equivalent to about 10 million Bangladeshi Taka) through the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic and floods. In addition, the World Bank approved a $500 million credit to help the nation combat the pandemic and the damage caused by floods.

There are 250+ INGOs registered with the government of Bangladesh. However, only a few are well-known for their ubiquitous presence in the country, some of which have been working with reputation even before the independence. A good example is UNICEF; its humanitarian actions during the Liberation War (1971) are below.

UNICEF had worked with other United Nations agencies in West Bengal to provide food, clean water, sanitation supplies, and utensils to refugees from Bangladesh living in camps during the liberation war of 1971. The organization was equally active during the pandemic and floods. In cooperation with the WHO, UNICEF established a 200-bed hospital for COVID-19 patients at Cox's Bazar for patients from surrounding areas and particularly for Rohingya communities (**Figure 6**). UNICEF also addressed the issue of acute malnutrition, infant and young child feeding, and iron and folic acid deficiency among the camp children. Its staff also engaged 1146 Islamic centers across the Cox's Bazar district to educate the local communities about the pandemic and the protective measures they need to take to prevent infection. To minimize the impact of the floods, UNICEF allocated $2.7 million in cash and provided food, safe water, and medical supplies. It also provided counseling services for infants and young children, while 50,000+ pregnant and lactating mothers received iron and folic acid supplements. On May 31, 2022, UNICEF delivered 190 million COVID-19 vaccines to Bangladesh through COVAX—a worldwide initiative aimed at equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines. UNICEF was present during the floods to protect children and to meet their urgent needs and worked closely with other local and international organizations to provide flood relief.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). During the pandemic, 40 million children in Bangladesh experienced significant disruptions in education. Following Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's advice, UNESCO introduced remote learning and online teaching, declared a global public good. Thus, INGOs assisted with child welfare and other humanitarian services,

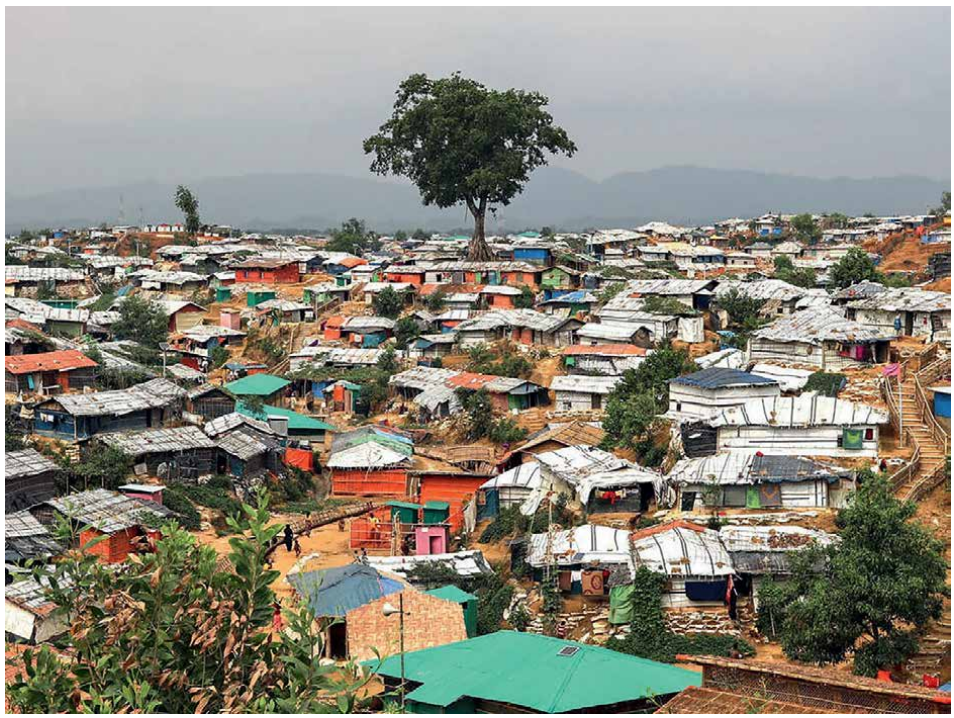

Figure 6.
A view of the Rohingya Camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Source: https://www.npr.org/2021/03/22/979962565/fire-sweeps-through-rohingya-refugee-camp-in-southern-bangladesh.

including data generation and analysis aid in preparing comprehensive reports on pandemics and floods.

Oxfam. In partnership with UNICEF, Oxfam implemented a WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) program in Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar. They trained about 400 camp-based volunteers—more than 50% female—to monitor health status in their communities. Female volunteers were vital in reaching women and girls. Oxfam also donated food and medical equipment to treat Rohingya camps.

CARE. Since its inception in 1945, Cooperation for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) has been known for its commitment to delivering emergency relief for disaster victims. In response to the pandemic and floods in Bangladesh, CARE extended food support to its 600 affected members, created awareness of personal hygiene and social distancing in the community, and helped district administration manage isolation. However, its more significant contribution is summarized in the following excerpt:

> *CARE Bangladesh opened a 40-bed isolation center in Rohingya Camp Extention at Cox's Bazar to treat and support the Rohingya community with mild to severe COVID-19 symptoms. The center is well-equipped with separate dormitories, washrooms, and bathing spaces for male and female patients, where doctors, ambulances, medicine, oxygen support, and COVID-19 sample collection are available around the clock. The center, which runs on solar power, also plans to provide all patients with three mills daily [17].*

Water Aid Bangladesh (*WAB*). It is an international development organization committed to providing clean water, decent toilets, and good hygiene. WAB is renowned for relying on young volunteers to support the slum population and squatters—it also assisted the Government of Bangladesh—in association with the WHO and the UNDP—in developing an innovative digital solution designed to address the needs of slum dwellers. Its programmatic activities included the installation of context-specific handwashing devices and social awareness of the disease in their proximity. The youth volunteers contributed to this endeavor by educating people on hand washing and other measures to keep themselves safe during the pandemic [18].

5.3 Special Mention of Contributions of Corporations (CSR), Faith-based Organizations, Youth Groups (Clubs), and Altruistic Individuals

Although many notable organizations deserve mention, due to the limited space, we chose one case for each group—Basundhara Group (the leading conglomerate in Bangladesh) in Dhaka, Khalifa Potti Mosque in Bhola, and Youth Clubs of Feni, both in the south.

CSR of Basundhara Group and Its Welfare Unit Shuv Songh. Basundhara Group established the Medical College and Hospital (Ad-Din Medical College, Dhaka) and Nursing Institute in Keranigonj, Dhaka.

On May 17, 2020, *The Daily Sun* from Dhaka made the following cover page headline: Basundhara Group makes history. The news item reads:

> *Bashundhara Group's historical act of patriotism will remain in the annals of medical science for times to come as the world's second-largest COVID-19 5,000-bed hospital, which it gifted for the welfare of the people, was launched on Sunday (May 17, 2020). It's the second-largest hospital in the world dedicated to treating coronavirus*

> *patients. ... The hospital has 2,013 isolation beds. Among them, oxygen cylinders are attached to 71 beds. It also has at least 400 more portable oxygen cylinders [19].*

Basundhara Group distributed 2500 sacks of relief materials to the local police H.Q. at Sylhet and Sunamgonj for distribution to the flood victims. Further, 20,000 relief items were given to the Jamia Islamia Darul Ulum Hadith Kanaighat Madrsa faith-based group for the same purpose. The group also donated significant (undisclosed) financial sums to the Prime Minister's Relief fund for the Sylhet-Sunamgonj floods.

Its other human development works include a free clinic on Friday at Basundhara Eye Hospital in Dhaka and Basudhara Medical College Hospital in Manikgonj, built-in 2024. The group provides financial assistance for underprivileged children and has established schools in the Rangpur Division, a relatively underdeveloped region. Basundhara Group's contributions to humanitarian services, including national health and education development, are appreciated at home and abroad.

Faith-based Organization—Khalifa Patti Mosque in Bhola. While CSR is a modern western invention with hundreds of foundations, there is evidence from developing countries that the three concepts—CSR, philanthropy, and charity—draw strongly on deep-rooted cultural traditions that grew out of religious beliefs and moral values in Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

Faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, many Islamic groups (faith-based organizations of local mosque committees) responded with the same resolve and commitment as the most widely known NGOs. Still, they were not registered or members of the Association of Development Agencies (ADAB), an NGO umbrella organization in Bangladesh. Khalifa Patti Mosque group offers funeral services to the community in Bhola Town (at the southern tip of Bangladesh). During the pandemic, a large number of local youth joined the mosque group and performed works like sacredly collecting and burying dead bodies and observing religious rituals. This was a vital service, as many family members of the diseased feared the infection and were unwilling to perform these rites, often abandoning their dead bodies on the street.

Local Youth Support in Feni. Like volunteers in Bhola, some youths in Feni town volunteered services to their vulnerable neighbors during the pandemic. They went door to door, focusing on those on low income and individuals who had lost their jobs during the pandemic. They distributed food collected from their neighbors, cash from wealthy community leaders, face masks, and handwashing soap. The Feni Youth Group also performed funeral roles and responsibilities, including handling dead bodies within 2/3 days of the date of death. They also used mobile phones or the internet to allow people without access to a mobile phone to register for the online COVID-19 vaccination platform. The youth group's contribution may not be substantial, but their dedication to this highly humane and sensitive cause was praiseworthy.

Barrister Syed Saidul Haque Sumon, a Supreme Court lawyer, is also worthy of recognition for his voluntary work. He organized a team of 600+ volunteers from his constituency (Habigonj 4 in Sylhet) and collected many donations from private foundations and individual charities. During the floods, Sumon and his team rescued thousands of flood victims, distributed relief items, and donated food packages, cooked food, and essential medicines for flood-related ailments.

Many other foundations and individuals contributed substantially to the fight against COVID-19 and the flood relief efforts. For example, the Summit Group

Chairman Muhammed Aziz Khan donated $1 million to the International Center for Diarrheal Disease Research (ICDDR) Hospital Endowment Fund. Dr. Kamol Krishna Kundu, a physicist in a market town, Chatmohar, in Pbana to Chatmohar Upzila Sasth Complex (Chatmohar Government Hospital) provided $100,000 monetary contribution, as well as food assistance to thousands of poor local families. This true spirit of *giving* was unprecedented. Many diasporas living in North America and Europe also sent money for pandemic help and flood relief.[5]

6. Summary and concluding remarks

This chapter focused on the roles of some selected NGOs and INGOs during the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh and the subsequent devastating floods in Sylhet and Sunamgong districts. We also reviewed the contributions of civil society organizations, including CSR, faith-based organizations, volunteer services from youth groups, and individual philanthropists. The discussion was guided by an analytical framework emphasizing the importance of NGOs work, motivation, and ability to develop partnerships with other relief agencies, the government, and donor agencies and their positive image in society.

As was shown in the previous sections, there was no shortage of motivation on the part of NGOs to minimize the impacts of the pandemic and floods in Bangladesh. They also invested significant effort into obtaining money and relief materials from every possible source and maintained close cooperation with other INGOs and philanthropic groups. The enthusiasm of youth groups and some individual institutions (such as SKS and DCHT) to do good for the people was praiseworthy. While the government of Bangladesh did its best, the INGOs' contribution to the Rohingya Camp was remarkable.

Yet, despite all the compassion and public spiritedness, during the pandemic, we observed chaos, death, and grief during the pandemic, and the helplessness of the flood victims was very much on display. As such, greater efforts must be made to offer these organizations—particularly those of smaller size and informal volunteer groups—the support needed to ensure their sustainability and enable them to provide the much-needed services wherever they are required.

In sum, the experiences of the pandemic and flash floods have made it clear that the government of Bangladesh cannot meet such challenges alone—it needs the help of NGOs, CSR, and civil society organizations. Besides providing material help with microcredit and relief goods, NGOs can assist with the non-material aspects of development, particularly empowerment, participation, and democratization processes. If those activities are expanded, they can help develop a stronger civil society and facilitate relief operations by NGOs during the post-COVID era. It can be more effective if local sociopolitical authorities provide proper infrastructure for relief distribution. However, if such systems are prone to corruption, they can hinder the operations of NGOs and governmental organizations. NGOs can also play a crucial role in preventing such scenarios. In addition to providing material and emotional support, NGOs can raise local awareness regarding democracy and accountability. Such educative efforts will enable the locals to hold their sociopolitical leaders accountable in times of need and stability.

[5] We have borrowed the concept of *giving* as a synonym for philanthropy from Professor Adil Najam [20].

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Chapter 8

The Environmental and Social Impact of Cloth Sanitary Pad Usage in Indonesia: A Case Study of the Women's Care Team

Benedicta Evienia Prabawanti

Abstract

In Muka Village (MV), East Jakarta, waste management poses significant challenges for women, particularly concerning the disposal of disposable menstrual pads, which harm the environment and health. Women's Care at Atma Jaya Catholic University Of Indonesia collaborated with local women to introduce cloth sanitary napkins as a sustainable solution. Following Jerome Bruner's theory of meaning construction, involving women in learning and problem-solving proved essential. The MV women responded positively, showing interest in learning to produce and market cloth pads. Training and support addressed environmental issues while creating economic opportunities. The locally made cloth menstrual pads have been sold through various channels, positively impacting the environment and MV's economic prosperity. This research analyzes the environmental and social effects of cloth sanitary napkins in Indonesia, focusing on the Women's Care Team in MV, East Jakarta. Cloth pads are seen as a sustainable alternative to disposable ones, often containing harmful chemicals. The Women's Care Team is vital in empowering MV's women to adopt cloth pads through a participatory approach, aligning with sustainable development goals.

Keywords: cloth pad, women's community, women's reproductive health, waste solution, women empowerment

1. Introduction

Waste management has become a crucial issue in environmental sustainability and public health. One highlighted aspect is the impact of disposable sanitary napkin usage on the environment. Ironically, waste from disposable sanitary napkins typically decomposes between 500 and 800 years old. Moreover, these products often contain harmful chemicals detrimental to both the body and the environment, such as chlorine [1–3] and synthetic polymers [4]. This concern underscores the need for sustainable alternatives and heightened awareness regarding conventional sanitary products' environmental and health consequences.

The problem with disposable menstrual pads is the issue of raw materials, one of which is polyethylene. Polyethylene is a plastic component commonly used in disposable sanitary napkins and tampons. However, most organisms do not consider this plastic food, so it cannot be broken down [5]. Disposable menstrual pad waste that cannot be decomposed on the ground will eventually fall into the ocean and spread across beaches. According to Edwards [6], there are many cases where used tampons and sanitary napkins are found in the stomachs of dead fish. Lusher et al. [7] also found that microplastics accounted for 36.5% of fish sampled in UK waterways. These microplastics will cause serious health problems if they eventually enter the human body through the fish they consume.

Several previous studies have shown that women play an essential role in managing natural resources, which are an important part of environmental protection [8, 9]. When compared to men, women often pay more attention to environmental issues [10–12]. Ironically, women are also responsible for making significant contributions to the garbage every year. One example is garbage from the envelope. Women are often unaware of the danger of packaging garbage or do not know how to manage it. Most developing countries, including Africa [13] and India [14, 15], are experiencing low awareness about managing menstrual product garbage.

The increase in consumption of disposable sanitary napkins directly contributes to the amount of plastic waste produced. In the case of Indonesia, with a population of 113.9 million women of childbearing age [16], they need sanitary napkins for 12 menstrual periods in 1 year. Various stakeholders in Indonesia have made various efforts to reduce waste. However, there are many challenges to achieving Indonesia's target of reducing by 30% and adequately handling waste by 70% of total waste by 2025. Through women's communities, women can take a more significant role in handling waste, especially disposable menstrual pad waste.

The problem of disposable sanitary napkin waste is also prevalent among women in Kampung Muka. When using disposable sanitary napkins, the primary options for handling the waste are either disposing it in regular trash bins or rivers. This behavior has continued to persist until now. Certainly, improper disposal practices of sanitary napkin waste directly contribute to environmental pollution.

In addition to the negative environmental consequences, disposable sanitary napkins affect women's reproductive health. Women in the reproductive age group in Kampung Muka predominantly rely on disposable sanitary napkins during menstruation. The primary reasons for their preference for disposable napkins include comfort, product availability, and ease of disposal. This rationale aligns with a study conducted by Fatkhu Rohmatin and Habsari [17], revealing that 95% of women in the childbearing age group opted for disposable sanitary napkins, citing convenience and availability as decisive factors. This observation corresponds with the perspective of Davidson [18], who identified convenience and product availability as critical determinants in the selection of sanitary products.

Apart from the problem of environmental pollution, women are also faced with reproductive health risks when using disposable or conventional sanitary napkins. Disposable hygienic napkins generally contain several chemicals that can hurt women's health. One substance often contained in disposable hygienic napkins is chlorine, used as a bleaching agent. Chlorine has carcinogenic properties, which can increase the risk of cancer in the long term.

Sanitary napkins, a fundamental requirement for women who have reached puberty, become essential during menstrual. Typically, women experience menstruation from 12 to 50, although variations exist influenced by physical conditions, environment, and

climate. The average duration of menstruation is around 6 days, with the replacement of sanitary napkins approximately three times a day. Therefore, in 1 month, a woman requires about 18 units of sanitary napkins. The high demand for this product reflects its crucial role in maintaining cleanliness and comfort during the menstrual cycle.

Women can actively contribute to meeting the significant demand for sanitary napkins through various avenues. Firstly, they can be discerning consumers by opting for eco-friendly and reusable sanitary napkins, thereby reducing the waste generated by disposable ones. Additionally, women can participate in the production of cloth pads or environmentally friendly alternatives, promoting a more sustainable approach. This can be achieved by supporting local industries that manufacture cloth pads or are undergoing training to craft their own. Furthermore, women can play a pivotal role in awareness campaigns, educating the public on the importance of choosing environmentally friendly sanitary products and minimizing their adverse environmental impact. Hence, women can contribute to environmental conservation and enhance social well-being through active participation in addressing menstrual hygiene needs.

Despite efforts to mitigate the issue of sanitary napkin waste for women, access to cloth pads remains a formidable task for girls in Kampung Muka. In addressing this challenge and other problems, women face at various stages of human development in Kampung Muka, the "Women Caring" group was formed. "Women Caring" is a small group of lecturers and students affiliated with the Department of Community Empowerment at Atma Jaya Catholic University Jakarta. The group aims to eliminate barriers to reproductive health education and the use of cloth pads for women in Kampung Muka, East Jakarta.

In the year 2022, with the support of Atma Jaya Catholic University of Indonesia Jakarta (AJCUI), Women's Care conducted a needs assessment aimed at enhancing the retention rate of women in Kampung Muka by assisting them in managing menstruation through affordable access to cloth pads. The specific objectives of this research were: (a) to equip women in Kampung Muka with business skills to market the reusable cloth pads they produce, (b) to transition to using cloth pads, thereby reducing disposable sanitary napkin waste, and (c) to establish a simple business accounting system for the community.

Perempuan Peduli collaborates with a non-governmental organization, Biyung Indonesia, in this project. Biyung will be a trainer in the practical training session on making cloth sanitary napkins. Biyung Indonesia, established in Yogyakarta, is a non-profit organization that aims to educate women to pay attention to their reproductive health while providing exceptional training in making cloth napkins.

Translated with DeepL.com (free version) In this project, Women's Care collaborates with a non-governmental organization (NGO), "Biyung Indonesia." Biyung Indonesia will be a trainer in the practical training sessions for producing cloth pads. Located in Yogyakarta, Biyung Indonesia is a non-profit organization with the mission of educating women to pay attention to their reproductive health and providing specialized training in the production of cloth pads.

2. Research objective

2.1 Project area

The empowerment method employed utilizes a participatory approach. The empowerment target population focuses on the female residents of Kampung Muka,

situated in RW (Rukun Tetangga—RT) 04, which encompasses 9 RTs (Rukun Tetangga). The empowerment initiatives enhance women's reproductive health and environmental sustainability and augment family income.

Administratively, Muka Village is located in the Pademangan Subdistrict, Ancol Village, North Jakarta, DKI Jakarta, Indonesia. This residential area is also situated near the railway line, attracting many incoming residents due to its convenient accessibility from various directions. See **Figure 1**, map location Muka Village (MV).

2.2 Characteristics of Kampung Muka environment

An urban village, such as Kampung Muka, exhibits distinctive features, including residents who still retain rural lifestyle characteristics and behaviors, closely bound by familial ties. The physical conditions of buildings and the environment are often suboptimal and disorganized, with high population and building density. Kampung Muka faces challenges like minimal open spaces, limited land, and narrow alleyways. The high population, heterogeneous nature, and proximity to the economic center contribute to the perception of Kampung Muka, reflecting the characteristics of an urban village.

According to a study conducted by Adinata et al., Kampung Muka, based on the Ministry of Public Works and Public Housing Regulation No. 2 of 2016 concerning the Improvement of the Quality of Slums and Slum Settlements, falls into the category of mild slums. The scoring of infrastructure elements in Kampung Muka consists of three parameters: if the quality of the infrastructure is poor or 76–100% poor, it is assigned a score of 5; if the quality is moderate or 51–75% average, a score of 3 is given; and if the quality is good or 25–50% good, a score of 1 is assigned. The severity of environmental quality is classified as heavy slums for a total score of 55–75, moderate slums for a total score of 35–54, and mild slums for a total score of 15–34.

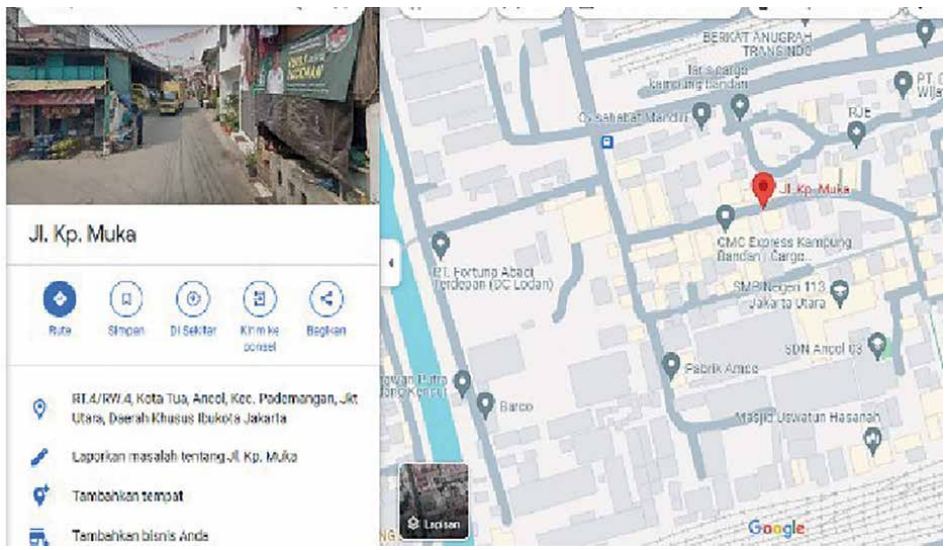

Figure 1.
Kampung Muka's area in North Jakarta District. Based on its geographical position, Kampung Muka has the following boundaries: North: Jl. Kampung Bandan; South: Kemayoran railway track; East: Kemayoran railway track; West: Kampung Kunir.

In assessing various aspects, particular attention is directed toward the waste management system. Most of the community needs an understanding of proper waste sorting methods, leading to suboptimal waste management in the settlement, especially concerning separating wet and dry waste. This condition aligns with the data obtained from discussions held by Peduli Perempuan and members of the women's community in Kampung Muka. All discussion participants stated that they do not practice waste separation, particularly in the case of sanitary napkin waste.

In addition to the issue of waste sorting, waste piles at the Waste Disposal Site (WDS) are still visible due to irregular or unscheduled garbage collection by sanitation workers. The open condition of the WDS leads to scattered waste along the streets, causing an unpleasant odor in the surrounding settlement.

The community in Kampung Muka exhibits significant diversity, represented by a selected group of respondents observed in this research. Most of the chosen respondents are male (82%), which aligns with the data collection method, which targets household heads and village officials. Generally, active community participation tends to fall within the age range of 31–40 years (33%), with the majority having completed elementary school (35%) and junior high school (30%). This age range indicates a productive adult stage. The community's education level is relatively low, especially among elementary school graduates, which influences their knowledge of environmental standards.

Most community members work as entrepreneurs (46%) and laborers (34%), with the majority earning in the range of US$ 100–US$ 200 (33%) per month, which is below the DKI Jakarta Regional Minimum Wage (UMR). Most Kampung Muka residents need specialized skills, leading to difficulty finding suitable employment. On average, people residing in Kampung Muka have been settled for 20–30 years (51%), indicating a high level of affiliation with their residential area.

2.3 Characteristics of the Women's community

The women in Kampung Muka have formed a community known as the Kampung Muka Women's Community, consisting of approximately 30 members. Most community members play roles as housewives, but some engage in small businesses such as grocery stores, rice eateries, cake vendors, and other informal ventures. The age range of community members is between 25 and 65 years old. On average, their educational level ranges from junior high school to senior high school. Therefore, their understanding of sustainable environments is relatively sound.

Community members have actively participated in several educational programs related to environmental management, such as learning to create organic fertilizer and engaging in empowerment programs, including crafting skills, facilitated by non-governmental organizations. However, community members need help producing reusable sanitary pads and managing their businesses. For those members who already possess crafting abilities, the product manufacturing process is conducted at home during their leisure time.

The entire range of community activities consistently receives backing from leaders and staff at the local government level, spanning from neighborhood associations (Rukun Warga) to the sub-district. This support is evident in the community's involvement in various initiatives organized by local government authorities. The construction of meeting facilities is also a manifestation of the government's endorsement, aiming to facilitate the activities of the women's community in Kampung Muka.

3. Needs assessment stage

The needs assessment is conducted through a series of methods, including observation, informal discussions with stakeholders, and surveys of participants using guided questions. This approach aims to identify specific needs that will be addressed during the training and business skills development sessions by the Women's Care and Biyung Indonesia teams.

An interview guide with predetermined questions is utilized to gather in-depth information on various aspects, including the menstrual pad waste management process, business priorities, and potential interventions. Interviews are conducted orally to facilitate the participation of participants who may need more confidence in written responses. Specific questions involve a general understanding of cloth pads, pad production, quality control, sales and marketing strategies, business sustainability, and the trademark registration process. The data collected from this assessment is the foundation for conducting pre- and post-training evaluations, helping measure the project's impact on the Women's Community Cloth Pad business in Kampung Muka. Women's Care actively coordinates with relevant stakeholders, such as the head of the Neighborhood Association and local officials, including other community leaders, to ensure support for the cloth pad project.

In Kampung Muka, Peduli Perempuan engaged in a limited discussion with 20 members of the women's community. This group comprises four leaders, community administrators, and 16 homemakers. Before responding to the questions, the Women's Care Team explained the objectives of developing the cloth pad business. All participants answered the questions through enthusiastic oral interviews. Eighteen women are familiar with this assessment process as they have previously participated in a handicraft-making training program organized by a non-governmental organization.

From the 2-hour needs assessment session, Women's Care gathered crucial information about the community's needs through discussions. Identified needs from the community members include the desire to create and use cloth pads and engage in the cloth pad business process to generate additional income for their families.

4. Training stage

The training was conducted in two sessions in Kampung Muka to educate women in (a) reproductive health and business planning and (b) practical production of cloth pads. In the first session, which focused on education and business planning, 25 participants attended for 8 hours. During this session, participants shared their expectations, including plans they intended to pursue after completing the cloth pad training program. In this session, they learned, among other things, (a) the impact of cloth pad usage on women's reproductive health and the environment, (b) creating a business model with the help of the Business Model Canvas, (c) marketing cloth pad products, (d) accessing raw materials, and (e) registering product trademarks.

Three trainers from Peduli Perempuan facilitated the training. The trainers elucidated the business concept easily using teaching methods such as lectures, Q&A sessions, group discussions, and games. The training also included instruction on creating simple business records for the community. The participants were fully engaged and responsive throughout the training. The afternoon session was dedicated to group discussions with clear expected outcomes, including the business models

they intended to pursue, marketing strategies to implement, and plans to register the trademark of cloth pad products.

Participants learned the practical aspects of cloth pad production in the second session. This session was facilitated by two trainers from Biyung Indonesia, who were accompanied by the Peduli Perempuan team. Participants learned, among other things, (a) an introduction to the raw materials of cloth pads, (b) cloth pad patterns, (c) sewing techniques for cloth pads, (d) packaging cloth pad products, and (e) the process of washing cloth pads.

The participants appeared very enthusiastic during each phase of the activity. They demonstrated good sewing skills from observations, making it relatively easy to create cloth pads according to the standards. Each participant was tasked with creating two cloth pad products, and all 23 participants completed the task.

5. Evaluation

Women's Care conducted the project evaluation process by analyzing information obtained from the needs assessment of women in Kampung Muka. The Women's Care team also conducted post-training visits for assessment purposes.

6. Assessment evaluation

Only 20 women participated in the discussion held indoors. All participants were enthusiastic about engaging in the production, distribution, and sale of cloth pads. Initially, the participants seemed eager to discuss menstruation in the presence of men but later opened up. Many women admitted to being somewhat concerned upon hearing that the disposable pads they commonly used contained potentially harmful substances in the long run. They also acknowledged gaining new knowledge about their reproductive organs' health, particularly how they should properly care for them.

In the discussion, women from Kampung Muka expressed that menstruation is a unique challenge, and its impacts vary based on their daily activities. Homemakers' household chores can be challenging, involving cooking, cleaning, fetching water, doing laundry, and washing dishes. For instance, some women feel unwell and unproductive before and during menstruation. Almost all participants also stated that their preference for disposable pads was influenced by comfort, ease of acquisition, and what they perceived as straightforward disposal of pad waste during menstruation.

When the discussion shifted toward the environmental issues caused by disposable sanitary pad waste, diverse responses emerged from the participants. Most participants acknowledged that disposing of disposable sanitary pads could harm the environment. However, they expressed willingness to try using cloth pads as an alternative to disposable ones. Some participants also stated that they would still use disposable pads in combination with cloth pads.

Participants' enthusiasm increased when they received information about selling the cloth pads they produced. All participants expressed their willingness to develop cloth pad products as a new source of income. Unfortunately, the participants' marketing skills, limited access to raw materials, and knowledge about registering a product brand were still deficient.

7. Post-training

The Women's Care was evaluated to determine the extent of the impact on the participants.

Out of the 25 training participants, 15 have successfully produced reusable menstrual pads that meet the established quality standards. The remaining participants showed production results that still needed to complete the product quality standards. They acknowledged the need for more practice to improve their ability to produce reusable menstrual pads according to the set standards. The 15 participants who successfully created standard-quality reusable menstrual pads have engaged in the production process at home for personal use and to fulfill orders from potential buyers. Orders for the menstrual pads are placed through the community of women in Kampung Muka, with offline transactions managed by community leaders. Additionally, orders were received from a male supporter who expressed willingness to assist in marketing the reusable menstrual pads.

Participants who successfully produced standard-quality cloth pads in 1 week could average 10 product units. The production process took place during their leisure time. Throughout the production process, participants who had mastered the standard cloth pad-making skills assisted their peers in improving the quality of the products. This reflects collaboration and knowledge transfer among community members, strengthening their skills in creating products that meet the established quality standards (**Table 1**).

Fifteen participants reported that they had used cloth pads during their menstrual periods, highlighting an initial adaptation period to their usage. They explained experiencing discomfort when using cloth pads, but after several uses, they felt comfortable. On the other hand, participants who had yet to try cloth pads expressed their intention to improve the quality of their self-made cloth pads before using them. This illustrates the varied experiences and perspectives within the community regarding the adoption and comfort levels associated with using cloth pads.

In managing the cloth pad business, the community has adopted a simple bookkeeping system, still utilizing manual methods. However, there are some complaints regarding the considerable time required for bookkeeping tasks. Two community members responsible for these duties have reported challenges related to efficiency and the time needed. They desire to enhance the bookkeeping system for greater efficiency and effectiveness in supporting the sustainability of their cloth pad business.

8. Discussion

The research conducted in Kampung Muka can serve as a reference for developing studies on various issues.

9. Long-term social and economic impact analysis

Research on the long-term impact of using cloth pads in Kampung Muka can delve into the community's economic and social well-being. In the economic context, the study can measure the growth of family income among community members,

No	Testimony
1	"I can now produce ten pieces of cloth pads. Some I will use myself, and the rest I will sell through the community." - Housewife, 32 years old.
2	"I have started using my handmade cloth pads. However, there is still a need for adjustment to match the comfort of disposable pads." - Housewife, 45 years old.
3	"Some orders for cloth pads have already come in from our colleagues through the community organizers." - Community leader, 51 years old.
4	"I have successfully created a business bookkeeping system for the cloth pad business. However, it seems like I need a more detailed system for data input." - Bookkeeping coordinator, 28 years old.

Table 1.
Testimonials on post-training evaluations.

identify changes in spending patterns, and analyze the positive financial impact derived from the production of cloth pads. On the social front, the research focus can be directed toward women's participation in local economic activities, exploring how increased income empowers women to take an active role in the community. The analysis can also involve evaluating the attendance rates of female students in schools, determining whether the availability of cloth pads has reduced school absenteeism due to menstrual constraints, and to what extent this positively impacts the education and overall development of women in Kampung Muka.

10. Researching the effectiveness of training

Conduct a study to evaluate the extent to which the training provided by Women's Care and Biyung Indonesia effectively enhances community members' skills in producing cloth pads. The research may encompass aspects such as participant satisfaction, skill improvement, and the training's impact on the sustainability of production. Examining participant satisfaction involves understanding their overall contentment with the training content and delivery. Assessing skill improvement will measure the tangible enhancements in the participant's ability to produce high-quality cloth pads. Additionally, investigating the training's impact on sustainability will explore whether participants can consistently and independently engage in the production process after the training concludes. This comprehensive evaluation aims to provide valuable insights into the overall effectiveness of the training program.

11. Researching material and production innovations

It is studying material innovations for environmentally friendly and efficient cloth pads. This research will explore sustainable alternatives and materials that contribute to the overall eco-friendliness of the product. Investigating modern and effective production technologies is crucial for enhancing production capacity and product quality. This involves exploring advanced manufacturing methods, automation, and technological solutions that can optimize the production process. The focus is on identifying materials that are not only sustainable but also cost-effective, ensuring

that the production aligns with both environmental and economic considerations. By embracing innovative materials and production technologies, the goal is to elevate cloth pad production's overall sustainability and efficiency in Kampung Muka.

Developing new products and trials on reusable pad products offers the potential to reduce waste flows. However, standards and regulations for these products only exist in some countries, so performance research is required to determine the quality standards that will guide future product development. Establishing performance and quality standards for such products is essential for hygienic use and has important implications for disposal and waste management [19].

12. The role of government in small business development

The study on the role of local government in supporting and facilitating small businesses, such as cloth pad production at the community level, is crucial for understanding the dynamics of entrepreneurship in Kampung Muka. The research will explore the policies, incentives, and obstacles the community faces in developing their business. Examining the supportive policies and incentives the local government provides can shed light on the enabling environment for small enterprises. Additionally, identifying and addressing any barriers or challenges the community entrepreneurs face will contribute to formulating recommendations for policy improvements. This research aims to provide insights into how the local government can play a more effective role in fostering the growth of small businesses, promoting economic sustainability, and empowering local communities.

13. Conclusion

The cloth project in Kampung Muka has concluded with several positive social and environmental impacts. Firstly, the successful training of 15 participants in producing cloth pads according to standards demonstrates a tangible achievement of the project's primary objectives. This accomplishment signifies a significant step toward promoting sustainable menstrual hygiene practices within the community. This aligns with research conducted by Kobia et al. [20], which states that directly developing recycle pads in the community can solve the 3P problems of people, planet, and profit. Moreover, women who are satisfied with the quality of the recycled pads are prepared to promote the product to their friends.

Furthermore, the encouraging shift toward using locally produced menstrual pads among the training participants is a positive sign of the project's impact on behavior change. The growing adoption of these sustainable alternatives bodes well for the community's overall health and environmental sustainability.

As a next step, it is imperative to address the need for ongoing training, particularly for those community members who have demonstrated proficiency in menstrual pad production. Providing advanced training to empower them as trainers in menstrual pad production would contribute to the project's sustainability and foster knowledge dissemination within the community. The findings also align with the HERS-EA program that trains Butaleja women on how to make cloth pads. As a result, in December 2015, women in the Butaleja District made and sold the first batch of reusable cloth pads and were ready to develop further skills and business if they could access additional capital [21].

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Lastly, the evaluation emphasizes the importance of enhancing the quality of the bookkeeping system and marketing strategies. These improvements are crucial to ensuring the long-term success of the menstrual pad business. The project can solidify its impact, empower the community, and contribute to sustainable menstrual hygiene practices in Kampung Muka by addressing these areas.

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The book is focused on the third sector, including civil society organizations, hereinafter referred to as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and their participation in governance, especially in times of crisis. The book's broad objective is to explore the role that NGOs play – independently and in collaboration with government institutions and private firms – in defining, shaping, and achieving the public good. The focus is on NGOs that help to overcome the influence of recent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The book presents various examples of NGOs assisting in developing new services for refugees and other victims of the recent crises in developed as well as in developing countries. The book answers the questions of how NGOs deal with migration, human rights, environmental issues, polarization, democracy, and resilience in these turbulent times.

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