Asia REF
Religious & Ethnic Freedom

Local Actors' Capacity Strengthening Needs in BANGLADESH

Introduction

In line with the Asia Religious and Ethnic Freedom (REF) program's learning agenda, this brief aims to provide valuable insights into the institutional and staff capacity needs, strengths, and challenges faced by local partners and international actors in the context of promoting religious and ethnic freedoms in the Asia region. This learning brief focuses on answering learning questions to enhance our understanding of the capacity building needs and strengths of local partners. By analyzing their experiences, the Asia REF team aims to identify information gaps, technical capacity needs, and the factors that hinder or facilitate effective work in promoting religious freedom. This knowledge will guide the team in developing targeted interventions and strategies to strengthen the capacity of local Asia REF partners to promote religious and ethnic freedoms in Asia.

The data was collected with the support of a local organization Films 4 Peace Foundation during the Local REF perspectives workshop in Bangladesh on August 12, 2023. In total, 17 people participated in the meeting, including 9 females and 8 males. The discussion focused on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats/risks (SWOT) local NGOs face in implementing internationally funded religious freedom projects, as well as their assessment of the benefits and limitations of cooperation with donor organizations. Delving into the strengths and weaknesses within their respective organizations, the analysis aimed to uncover the underlying factors that influence their engagement in their respective fields. The analysis draws upon the diverse perspectives and experiences of civil society members, offering valuable insights that can shape the future direction of their organizations.

Institutional & Staff Capacity of CSOs in Bangladesh

Strengths

- Local organizations demonstrate a deep understanding about the needs of their communities and the geographical, religious, and political context in which they operate. This knowledge enables them to design programs tailored to the specific requirements of their target populations.
- Local organizations have established networks at both local and national levels, fostering partnerships that contribute to successful project implementation. They have been implementing long-term projects/activities in the communities, developing mutual understanding, trust, and relationships with local government, various community stakeholders, media, journalists, religious groups or organizations, and non-governmental development organizations.
- Some local CSOs exhibit resourcefulness by identifying and leveraging diverse local resources, ensuring the sustainability of community projects beyond the INGOs' project cycle by securing support from the government, corporate social responsibility funds, crowdfunding, and UN agencies.

- Local organizations have a constructive partnership with the government through various development projects. For example, collaborations with state agencies on issues related to women's empowerment, human trafficking, care for the elderly, and skills development demonstrate strong partnerships with local CSOs. These partnerships and constant coordination foster trust and cooperation.

Weaknesses

- Obtaining nonprofit registration and project approval remains a significant barrier in Bangladesh that limits the CSO space and quick initiation of programs.
- Local organizations lack the capacity and specialized skills required for effective program planning and implementation. Lack of skills in fundraising, communication, organizational management, project management, and implementation pose challenges to overall capacity and hinder growth.
- Most of the local organizations do not have mechanisms for generating funds locally or internal sources of income. In this context, they depend on external donors' organizations. This will create financial vulnerability when facing a funding crisis or if donors' priorities shift in funding themes or countries.
- A lack of communication skills, weak networking, and insufficient resources among local CSOs create unequal partnerships with INGOs/donors, skewing power dynamics and limiting effective collaboration. This often leads to the donor–driven agendas, overlooking local needs, causing a loss of trust and potential impact.
- Due to lack of resources in local organizations, relatively low wages, and lack of benefits, skilled workers move to international organizations in the hope of better pay and benefits. As a result, retention is an ongoing concern, potentially affecting project continuity and quality.

Opportunities

- The positive reputation and trust CSOs hold within their communities serve as a crucial asset, enabling effective engagement and support for potential REF projects.
- Local organizations' long–term experience and understanding of community issues and needs position them to explore and expand into new thematic areas, enhancing the relevance and impact of religious freedom projects.
- Established trust and collaborative history with local governments empower CSOs to forge partnerships that can amplify the scope and effectiveness of internationally supported initiatives.
- In–depth knowledge of local language, culture, and customs facilitates seamless project implementation, ensuring community acceptance and success.

Risks

- CSOs often encounter harassment and political interference, ranging from project approval to implementation, including government withholding of funding and project suspension. This interference disrupts organizational activities and is further compounded by political parties and religious power brokers pushing their agendas, risking religious freedom activities by spreading rumors and misinformation.
- Intensive government oversight and regulation throughout project implementation challenge operational flexibility. Security agency scrutiny instills a sense of insecurity among local participants, diminishing their participation and openness. Moreover, the necessity for approvals from the Bureau of NGO Affairs and relevant ministries, along with crucial local government involvement, can significantly hinder project execution.
- Sometimes rumors and misinformation can damage the reputation of local organizations, affecting community trust and donor confidence. This has led to credibility issues for several organizations, impacting their ability to secure future funding and support.
- Donor assistance has decreased in Bangladesh in recent times. As the evolving funding landscape poses a constant risk, navigating financial challenges requires adaptability and changing donor priorities.
- The absence of conflict of interest policies in many CSOs leads to accountability challenges. This lack of policy enforcement can result in non-transparent practices, such as procuring goods from acquaintances without market comparison, potentially leading to financial inefficiencies and compromised project quality.

NGO & Donor/INGOs Cooperation

Strengths

- The strong reputation and branding of international organizations increase the local acceptance and credibility of CSO to implement projects. This partnership not only elevates the CSOs' standing in the community but also fosters trust with the government.
- INGOs/donors can play an important role in ensuring the financial stability of local organizations, providing a crucial foundation for project implementation.
- Collaboration with international organizations brings access to superior administrative systems and processes, enhancing the efficiency of project management and execution. This interaction helps build the administrative capacity of local CSOs, enabling them to operate more independently and effectively.
- The inclusive approach adopted by some INGOs/donors in project implementation promotes collaboration and ensures a deeper understanding of the local context, leading to more effective and contextually appropriate project outcomes.

Weaknesses

- Collaborative projects with international organizations sometimes face suspension, postponement, or termination, leading to reduced community trust and financial insecurity for local organizations. Such disruptions raise questions about the long-term impact and sustainability of initiatives, as seen in the 2021 suspension of a project addressing violent extremism, which caused significant financial losses and damaged community trust.
- International organizations' limited understanding of the local context can lead to prioritizing goals that may not align with the actual needs of local populations, resulting in less effective interventions.
- INGOs tend to provide insufficient budgets to local CSOs,which hampers their ability to cover human resources, operational, and programmatic needs adequately, affecting the quality of delivered programs.
- For most INGOs/donors, English is a working language, which affects the effectiveness of the interventions. For instance, when project activities (e.g. workshops) are conducted in English with simultaneous translation, participants from the local community may not fully grasp explanations and important nuances may be lost in translation, causing confusion. Furthermore, the use of sensitive or specific terms related to topics such as religious freedom, LGBTQ+ rights, or cultural practices can lead to misunderstandings due to inaccurate translations or cultural sensitivities.

Opportunities

- The higher reputation and credibility of international organizations and the locally rooted trust towards local organizations in the community provide a pathway to successful project implementation, fostering collaboration and ensuring initiatives are aligned with community needs.
- The opportunity for empowerment arises from projects that focus on enhancing the skills and capabilities of individuals and communities, promoting sustainable change.
- The prospect of long-term project continuation provides opportunities for sustained outcomes, contributing to social change and addressing complex community challenges.

Risks

- The allocation of budgets by INGOs often necessitates careful management due to limitations, which underscores the importance of strategic resource planning to ensure project success and comprehensive community support. This is worsened when INGOs demand broad geographical coverage or activities beyond the CSOs' capacity, challenging their ability to deliver results and demonstrate effectiveness.

- Projects face significant risks when local NGOs' advocacy or actions against governance issues lead to government restrictions on funding and operational approval. There were instances when local organizations were denied operating with foreign funds in Bangladesh.
- Approval challenges from the INGO bureaucracy create barriers to project implementation within specified timelines, leading to delays and potential disruptions. Despite CSOs meeting all compliance requirements, obtaining approval from INGOs can be time-consuming, causing significant delays.
- Pressure from donors to meet their specific needs can risk the autonomy and effectiveness of local NGOs' projects, potentially shifting focus away from actual community needs and priorities.

Conclusion

The SWOT exercise conducted for local organizations promoting religious freedom in Bangladesh highlights several key insights. Local CSOs and NGOs benefit from local knowledge and understanding as they demonstrate a deep understanding of the needs of their communities and political and geographical context. This facilitates trust-building and context-specific program design. Their partnerships with government agencies also enable access and impact. However, capacity gaps in areas like fundraising, communication, and organizational management undermine growth. Dependence on donors creates financial vulnerability when facing funding crises or donor shifts. Lack of resources also contributes to staff retention issues affecting sustainability. A holistic approach to capacity building, improved networking, and proactive risk management will be essential for the sustained success and impact of these organizations in promoting religious freedom, human rights, and peace in Bangladesh.

INGOs can complement local NGO strengths through financial stability and administrative efficiency. Joint implementation allows blending international standards with local wisdom. However, risks like project dropout or phase out and lack of sustainability threaten success. Limited understanding of local context and lack of ownership undermine effectiveness. Aligning priorities to community needs, rather than donor pressure, is key to empowerment and lasting change.

Recommendations

Below are recommendations for donors to consider and contribute to strengthening the capacity of local NGOs and support their efforts to promote religious freedom in Asia.

Strengthen Financial Autonomy: Consider flexible funding models that support organizational development and sustainability, beyond project-specific funding. Encourage the development of local revenue-generating activities to reduce dependency on donor funding.	*Facilitate Knowledge Exchange*: Establish platforms for local and international CSOs to share experiences, best practices, and strategies for navigating political and regulatory challenges. This can foster innovation and resilience among local organizations.

Improve Communication and Cultural Competence: Offer training and resources to both local CSOs and international organizations to overcome language and cultural barriers, enhancing mutual understanding and collaboration effectiveness.

Address Unequal Partnerships: Work towards more equitable partnerships by recognizing and valuing the contributions and expertise of local CSOs. Implement mechanisms to ensure that local voices are heard and incorporated into decision-making processes.

Inclusive Project Design and Implementation: Ensure that project planning and implementation processes actively involve local CSOs from the outset, leveraging their in-depth understanding of community needs and cultural contexts to shape interventions.

Enhance Capacity Building: Invest in comprehensive capacity-strengthening programs focused on skill development in areas such as project management, financial management, advocacy, monitoring and evaluation, and communication. Tailor these programs to address the specific needs and contexts of local CSOs.

Support Local Advocacy Efforts: Assist CSOs in developing and strengthening their advocacy capabilities to engage effectively with government and regulatory bodies, aiming to create a more favorable operating environment for promoting religious and ethnic freedoms.