

New Generation of Civil Society Organizations in Digital Bangladesh: Case Study Analyses

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Abstract: This research aims to analyze the nature of the new generation civil society organizations (CSO) in Bangladesh in the light of the digitalization process going on in the country. Digital culture has already placed roots in socio-political and economic life. Bangladeshi CSOs, specially, NGOs have gained international reputation in the field of social development in the last three decades. But hardly there has been any investigation whether such digitalization has any effect on civil society. Present paper has revealed the nature of the new generation civil society organizations by applying Yin's 'explanation building through multiple case studies' method. The nature of digital adaptation by new CSOs (doing both service delivery and advocacy) stationed both at center and periphery have been revealed case by case. From the case study analysis, we can understand that new CSOs in Bangladesh are going through the phase of digital transition. Most of the CSOs have adopted digital technology into their daily activities but with varied intensity. Moreover, a deep digital divide exists in society as well as among the CSOs. Though the digital facility has ensured stronger network, quick outreach and better funds, the CSOs success still depend on the traditional elements like leadership, dedication, ideology and finally hard work.

Keywords: Civil Society Organization, Digitalization, Advocacy, Service, Digital Divide

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Introduction

Digitalization has become a widely discussed concept among scholars in both the natural and social sciences, as well as among policymakers. Its penetration into

social, political, and economic life—and the ways in which social institutions adapt to new technologies—are subjects of ongoing observation, analysis, and inquiry for social science researchers (Lynn et al., 2022; Samoilenko, 2023; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Castro-Nagatomy et al., 2022). Since 2009, digital culture has taken root in the socio-political and economic landscape of Bangladesh. This digital influence has undoubtedly contributed to shifts in the nature of civil society activity in the country. It is, therefore, reasonable to expect that the new generation of civil society organizations (CSOs) emerging in this increasingly digitalized context are utilizing cyber technologies to their full potential. This is not merely speculative.

Many CSOs that gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 are relatively new entrants in the third sector. During the pandemic's first wave, new CSOs initiated the primary private response to those in need (Tasnim 2021). These organizations carried out their formation, platform development, support expansion, fundraising, and coordination entirely through virtual networks. Additionally, this new generation of civil society is actively engaged in advocacy through digital platforms, such as the Youth Policy Forum. Such digital-based initiatives are not confined to privileged youth; they are also present in peripheral areas. In many cases today, a simple Facebook page is sufficient to initiate and organize voluntary actions, including protests.

Given these developments, methodical and systematic study of these new-generation CSOs is essential to explore their nature, operational styles, performance, uniqueness and limitations. It is also important to examine whether digitalization and internet adoption have occurred uniformly across the country, particularly among CSOs involved in diverse types of activities.

To this end, this paper presents case studies of four relatively new CSOs operating at both national and local levels that are engaged in service delivery and advocacy using digital technologies and virtual platforms. These case studies validate broader research conducted on the new generation of civil society in Bangladesh, wherein multiple CSOs were surveyed and the contents of their digital platforms (e.g., Facebook pages, websites) were analyzed. The findings of that broader research are being published in separate papers.

The case study analysis reveals that all types of CSOs have integrated digital technologies into their daily operations to achieve their missions and visions. However, a digital divide persists between centrally based and peripheral CSOs in terms of their performance and digital engagement. Furthermore, despite the so-

called digital revolution, the growth and success of these organizations continue to rely on traditional attributes such as leadership, ideology, networks, support systems, and commitment. This paper is broadly divided into three sections: the first outlines the theoretical background, the second discusses methodology, and the third presents, analyzes, and compares the case study findings.

Theoretical Background

Civil Society and Civil Society Organizations

Civil society is generally defined as sustained, organized social activity that takes place within groups formed outside the domains of the state, market, and family (Schwartz & Pharr, 2003). This definition encompasses a wide range of organizations categorized as civil society organizations (CSOs), including clubs, local cooperatives, labor unions, sports associations, professional groups, religious organizations, citizen's groups, and various forms of charitable and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). CSOs are typically involved in both service provision and advocacy (Tasnim 2021).

Advocacy refers to efforts aimed at influencing government policies and actions on various political and social issues, as well as advancing the interests of the CSOs themselves (Tasnim 2012). Service provision, on the other hand, involves the delivery of tangible benefits such as micro-credit, skills training, adult education, healthcare services, and other developmental support.

International development agencies and donor countries, influenced by the Neo-Tocquevillean perspective, have viewed civil society as a critical instrument for promoting good governance and democratic consolidation in the Global South (Diamond 1999; Putnam 1994). These scholars argue that there is a strong relationship between autonomous, community-based citizen groups and democratic governance. Accordingly, efforts should be made to strengthen such organizations to foster democratic transitions in authoritarian contexts and to consolidate democracy where it already exists (Armony 2004).

By advocacy and service delivery, civil society outreach to communities, and governmental bodies, contribute to public policy formulation and implementation, thereby creating avenues for broader citizen participation. In doing so, CSOs are also able to mobilize their members, supporters, and followers around specific issues or causes (Diamond 1999). While CSOs rarely aim to capture political power, they do engage in political spaces.

Financing remains crucial for nonprofit organizations such as CSOs. Their funding sources often include member subscriptions, public and private sector contracts, and voluntary and corporate donations (Stiles 2002). Over the past two decades, both national and international scholars have tracked the evolution of NGOs and civil society in Bangladesh (Lewis 2011, 2017; Ahmed 2021). Lewis (2019) describes the current era as a “post-NGO” civil society landscape, characterized by large, mature NGOs that have expanded beyond traditional development activities such as micro-credit and entrepreneurship, and have entered into commercial ventures including banking, transportation, dairy production, fashion, the apparel industry, and private education.

It must be acknowledged that the relationship between civil society, politics, and the state in Bangladesh is complex. Although civil society has been effective in fostering social development, it remains weak in terms of advocacy and policy influence (Tasnim 2012). In recent years the political space for civil society to operate autonomously has been significantly restricted. State repression of CSOs has become commonplace across the country. Despite this adverse political environment, the emergence of new CSOs has been facilitated by the expansion of digital infrastructure and optimistic ICT policies.

There is, however, a noticeable gap in systematic research focusing on this new generation of CSOs, particularly regarding their nature, performance, and contributions in recent years. Digitalization has created new opportunities for civil society in all areas of participation and action.

Digitalization

In the contemporary world, digitalization is regarded as a key contributor to enhancing governmental functions. It promotes citizen-centric services and supports socio-economic development. Furthermore, it serves as a cross-cutting issue relevant to both governmental and non-governmental organizations. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) facilitates closer engagement with citizens and fosters partnerships with diverse communities (Yeasmin & Yasmin 2020).

Digitalization refers to the integration of digital technologies, including information, communication, and computer-based tools—within organizations or institutions to transform traditional business models and create new value-generating opportunities that extend beyond previous practices (Samoilenko 2023). More succinctly, it can be described as the increasing adoption and application of digital technologies by organizations, industries, or nations (Brennen & Kreiss

2016). This process includes digital management of data, the automation of manual tasks, and the enhancement of service delivery.

Digitalization also introduces new forms of escapism through technologies such as augmented and virtual reality. However, in the marketplace, it presents the risk of job displacement, potentially exacerbating inequality and contributing to the digital divide. Digitalization can be examined through multiple analytical lenses: mechanism, as a social network, from an organic perspective, and as a form of political power, a system of social domination, or an economic system, among others (Samoilenko 2023).

Digital Divide

Ideally, digitalization should ensure that all citizens possess the access, competence, and skills necessary to utilize digital technologies effectively. However, in reality, this is far from being achieved. Across the globe, a significant portion of the population, particularly within certain communities, lacks both internet access and the skills required to benefit from digital technologies. This issue is not confined to developing countries alone (Lynn et al. 2022).

Digitalization is a multifaceted phenomenon. It encompasses not only access to technological infrastructure—such as computing devices, software, and the internet—but also digital literacy, frequency and type of use, and the tangible benefits derived from digital engagement. The digital divide is particularly evident between urban and rural populations, although it also emerges across a range of socio-economic factors, including age, income, education, and gender.

Cultural factors contribute to the divide as well. Many citizens do not fully engage with digital technologies or fail to utilize them to their full potential (Khatun et al. 2021). Traditional values and customs often hinder communities from embracing new technological services. In developing countries, the digital divide is largely driven by low levels of education, limited economic capacity, uneven development, and unequal access to digital infrastructure. This unequal accessibility is giving rise to new social hierarchies, significantly widening the gap between digitally connected and digitally excluded groups.

ICT Policy in Bangladesh

The primary objective of digitalization in Bangladesh is to drive effective transformation and progress in sectors such as education, healthcare, poverty alleviation, and broader social development (Hasan 2020).

The rapid expansion of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has significantly reshaped the socio-economic landscape of Bangladesh. Digital transitions have occurred across various domains, including education, agriculture, the judiciary, and commerce. Although citizen services are now increasingly offered through online platforms, these services have not yet become entirely free from obstacles. The ICT Policy of Bangladesh is structured around four foundational pillars: (1) human resource development, (2) connecting citizens, (3) digital governance, and (4) ICT business. The second pillar—connecting citizens—is aligned with the overarching goals of national ICT policy, emphasizing transparency, accountability, responsiveness, and improved efficiency in the delivery of public services (Hasan 2020). Achieving these goals requires collaborative efforts, particularly involving civil society organizations. In this regard, the government relies heavily on civil society to facilitate connections both among citizens and between citizens and government institutions.

Cyber Security Law in Bangladesh

The ICT policy framework in Bangladesh is supported and reinforced by corresponding ICT-related legislation. However, these laws over time have evolved into instruments perceived as repressive, particularly concerning freedom of expression. The primary objectives of the ICT Act and the Digital Security Acts (2006, 2018, and 2023) were to ensure national security, safeguard citizens' rights, protect data from potential threats, and provide legal protection against cyber offences.

Despite these stated goals, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB 2023) has reported that the legislation and associated national ICT policies have largely failed to prevent a series of cyberattacks, data leaks, and security breaches. More concerning is the curtailment of online freedom of expression, as the repressive provisions of these laws have often been misused. This development has had a chilling effect not only on journalists and the public but also on the advocacy efforts of civil society organizations (CSOs). The laws have enabled non-bailable arrests, searches without warrants, and pre-trial detentions (Sengupta 2023; Rahman 2023; *Dhaka Tribune* August 30, 2023).

In addition to ICT-related laws, CSOs are also constrained by regulatory legislation governing their registration and operation. These laws have limited their ability to express dissent or criticism of the government. Notably, during the Awami

League's administration (2009–2024), legislation such as the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act of 2016 created a climate of apprehension among CSOs and NGOs, who feared the revocation of their registration for non-compliance or perceived dissent (Tasnim 2021).

Digitalization and Civil Society in Bangladesh

Digital technology offers numerous potential benefits for civil society organizations (CSOs). These organizations can leverage digitalization as a strategic tool to address critical challenges and deliver more comprehensive services to their beneficiaries. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, traditional CSOs were unable to carry out their regular activities and provide on-the-ground support. In response, many adapted their operational models by shifting from offline to online platforms, conducting meetings via audio and video conferencing tools, using digital communication channels for coordination, and engaging in internet-based advocacy.

In recent years, a growing number of CSOs in developing countries, including Bangladesh, have adopted digital technologies in their daily operations. This transition has been associated with increased efficiency, reduced operational costs, enhanced productivity, broader collaboration opportunities, improved internal and external communication, strengthened public relations, and significant time savings (Castro-Nagatomy et al. 2022; Desk 2022; Hassan 2020; TBS 2022a, 2022b).

Among these technological adaptations, the most widely adopted and accessible digital tools include the establishment and maintenance of official websites and the use of social media platforms. In Bangladesh, Facebook is the most used social media channel. CSOs utilize such platforms to quickly reach citizens, engage with youth, attract donors, connect with target groups, improve organizational efficiency, and actively participate in governance through online activism.

Despite these advancements, few systematic investigations have been conducted to assess the practical realities of digitalization across the broader spectrum of CSOs in Bangladesh. Questions remain as to whether the perceived success of digital transformation is a universal experience among new-generation CSOs, or if it is limited to a select few that have gained prominence through social media. To gain deeper insights into this issue, we conducted case studies on a selection of CSOs.

It may be inferred that emerging CSOs are making the most effective use of digital tools available to them, albeit under significant constraints and within the

restrictive environment. It is also important to note the political context during which this study was conducted as of July 2024, following a popular uprising, the Awami League government was ousted after a 15-year tenure. This research was carried out during 2023 and early 2024, mostly prior to the uprising. However, the role of the four CSOs included in our case studies was observed during the uprising, particularly through their online statements and communications.

Method

For this research, the “explanation building through multiple case studies” method (Yin 2003) has been adopted. In a multiple-case study, the goal is to develop a general explanation that can be applied to each individual case, even though the details of the cases may differ. This approach is similar to conducting multiple experiments (Yin 2003). To test the propositions about new-generation CSOs in Bangladesh, this study systematically employs a variety of data sources, including in-depth observations, participant engagement, newspaper reports, documents provided by CSOs, and information gathered through interviews and group discussions with CSO personnel, as well as members and leaders of four CSOs in the Dhaka¹ and Rajshahi² districts.

The districts of Dhaka and Rajshahi were selected to highlight the contrasts between the center (Dhaka) and the periphery (Rajshahi). Four CSOs were carefully chosen to represent both service-providing and advocacy groups active at both central and local levels. Two CSOs from Dhaka were included: Mastul, a service-providing NGO, and Youth Policy Forum, an online-based advocacy group. Additionally, two CSOs from Rajshahi were selected: Nobojagoron Foundation, a university student-based service-providing organization, and Youth Action for Social Change, a local advocacy group. All four organizations were established after 2011, and they have embraced digitalization to varying extents. A common key factor among these CSOs is that they are youth-run. The case study analysis will primarily focus on the digital adaptation and digital penetration of these organizations, while also considering their other activities and impacts.

Each case study centers on several key aspects: the profile of the CSO, its functions, the use of its website and other digital platforms, the nature of its funding, its internal communication practices, the use of digital tools for professionalism, integrity, and effectiveness, political connections, bureaucratic relationships, interactions with the press.

Case Study Findings and Analyses

In light of the proposition that new CSOs are making the highest possible use of digital facilities within a controlled environment, we will now examine each case to assess how these organizations utilize digital tools. Specifically, we will explore their fundamental nature, as well as the extent and manner of their digital penetration and adaptation. Do we observe a consistent pattern of digital activity, or are there notable differences in how these CSOs function? Furthermore, are these differences comparable, or are they entirely distinct? The following analysis will provide answers to these questions.

Nobojagoron Foundation

Profile: The Bangla term *Nobojagoron* roughly translates to “Renaissance.” Established in 2012, the *Nobojagoron Foundation* is a university campus-based voluntary service organization primarily operated by students from the University of Rajshahi. It operates according to its constitution, with an executive committee of 85 members, which is renewed annually. A group of university professors acts as voluntary advisors to the organization.

The foundation’s primary objectives are community development and fostering youth leadership. Student volunteers provide informal education to underprivileged children. In this regard, the foundation organizes annual events such as sports activities, seminars, health check-ups, and winter clothing distribution for the children, in addition to hosting yearly festivals. As part of its income-generating activities, *Nobojagoron* also arranges an annual book fair. The organization has received several awards in recognition of its efforts.

Funding: The students raise funds through traditional methods, including membership fees, fundraising events, profits from book sales, donations from teachers and institutions, and a few sponsors. To date, the *Nobojagoron Foundation* has not utilized digital platforms such as websites or crowdfunding. Though they collect funds through mobile financial services (MFS) during natural calamities, they give greater emphasis on offline activities and efforts.

Networking: The organization maintains a friendly relationship with other campus-based student organizations and is part of a larger network of youth organizations called the *Barind Youth Forum*, which operates in the northern region of Bangladesh. This networking, too, occurs through traditional means.

Technology Use: The organization utilizes common technologies available on campus, free of charge, such as social media, email, Google Workspace, and Zoom, for both internal and external communication. However, there appears to be a significant amount of untapped digital potential and resources. While they are active on social media, the official website of the Nobojagoron Foundation is in poor condition and inaccessible due to technical errors. They have been unable to recover the website over the past three years due to a lack of technical expertise and funds to hire a skilled engineer.

The student volunteers lack the necessary knowledge and training to fully utilize digital tools beyond platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger, and Google Meet. Additionally, the beneficiaries of their services—underprivileged children and their parents—have limited access to digital resources. As a result, the Nobojagoron Foundation's outreach efforts toward their target group remain entirely offline.

Digital Divide: The negative effects of the digital divide are evident within the Nobojagoron Foundation, despite its status as a university-based organization. Due to a lack of funds for purchasing digital tools and providing training for volunteers, the foundation has been unable to fully digitalize its operations. This situation would likely be unimaginable for CSOs based in Dhaka.

Political, Administrative and Media Connections: Nobojagoron strives to maintain a positive relationship with the university administration. However, the organization remains hesitant to seek support or patronage from local political figures. Within the university campus, the Nobojagoron Foundation enjoys a secure position, bolstered by strong and positive relations with university authorities and administrative executives. Most of the foundation's advisors, who are university professors, are influential within both the university administration and politics (as of 2023 and 2024). The organization's relationship with the media is also satisfactory.

Challenges: Recently, the Nobojagoron Foundation has faced several challenges, including a lack of funding, insufficient skilled manpower, inadequate motivation among volunteers to engage in welfare activities, and the volunteers' social media addiction and laziness. The digital age has had both positive and negative effects on society, and this organization is no exception.

Overall Evaluation

It can be stated that the Nobojagoron Foundation is engaged in meaningful work but using traditional approach. Over the past decade, the children from underprivileged

communities, who were previously provided education by the volunteers, are now attending formal schools. This indicates that the community has made progress. Nevertheless, in terms of digitalization, the foundation's level of penetration and adaptation is relatively slow compared to the two Dhaka-based case studies.

Youth Action for Social Change (YASC)

Profile: Youth Action for Social Change (YASC) is a relatively small and new youth advocacy group that has gained popularity through social media. Its office is located in the centre of Rajshahi city, and its activities are primarily focused within the urban area. Established in 2015, YASC operates with a team of only 30 members. The organization primarily serves as an advocacy group, with objectives including raising awareness about road safety, ensuring the rights of women and children, protecting human rights, promoting food safety, safeguarding nature and biodiversity, developing a heritage archive, and supporting eco-friendly development movements. Their approaches remain simple and traditional, including submitting memorandums to authorities, writing articles in print and social media, organizing human chains, protest rallies, and sit-ins.

Most of YASC's advocacy issues are non-political. This young and small group received the Best Youth Award 2018 and the Best Campaigner Award 2018 from the government.

Networking: YASC has been somewhat conservative in building networks with other advocacy groups. Primarily it collaborates with environmental CSOs and participates in various environmental events aimed at protecting Rajshahi's ecosystem.

Funding: YASC operates with a limited budget, primarily funded through membership fees. Only 5% of their funds come from external sources, mostly in the form of logistical support or sponsorship.

Technology Use: The executives and volunteers of YASC utilize popular social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, for content promotion. The organization does not have an official website. For internal communication, they rely on email, WhatsApp, and Messenger. Digital tools are primarily used for communication and publicity purposes.

Recognizing that effective solutions often involve adapting existing technologies to the specific needs of their communities, YASC uses free and widely accessible technology. They are not particularly interested in leveraging digital tools for their

advocacy campaigns. Since their target audience is not yet digitally aware, they focus on organizing offline events.

Political, Administrative, and Media Connections: YASC does not prioritize building relationships with political figures or parties. However, they maintain positive connections with the administration, bureaucrats, and journalists.

Challenges: Bangladeshi society, even among the educated class, remains reluctant to embrace digital communication. After receiving an email, many people still expect a follow-up phone call. Moreover, individuals are often dissatisfied with digital campaigns and prefer hard copy leaflets, which are costly for YASC to produce. Other challenges include a lack of funding, logistical support, sponsors, and skilled manpower. Additionally, YASC must be cautious about their online content due to the strict regulations imposed by the Digital Security Act of Bangladesh.

Overall Evaluation: Based on observations, interviews, and content from their Facebook page, it is evident that YASC is an active CSO, primarily focused on advocacy, with an emphasis on environmental issues. However, YASC is not particularly ambitious about growing into a powerful or influential CSO, nor is it eager to enhance its capacity by adopting a more advanced digital infrastructure or reaching out to a broader audience.

Mastul Foundation

Profile: Established in 2012, Mastul is a new-generation, nationwide, charity-based service organization. Headquartered in Dhaka, its influence extends internationally, bolstered by a well-designed, highly accessible website. The term *Mastul*, derived from Bengali, refers to the mast of a boat that supports the sail, symbolizing a pathfinder. The organization embodies this philosophy by guiding underprivileged individuals towards economic self-sufficiency, educating and training orphans with life skills, and empowering people with disabilities to achieve independence. Mastul operates with a team of 61 regular staff members and 15,000 volunteers across the nation. The organization has earned national recognition for its extraordinary contributions to society, including commendable efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, it undertook the enormous task of burying nearly 3,000 COVID-19 victims, overcoming significant social, mental, and physical challenges. (Mastul Website 2023; Mach Ranga TV Morning Show June 25, 2021).

Funding: Mastul's funding model, while not entirely unique, distinguishes itself from traditional NGOs. Unlike many organizations that rely on large

international donors or micro-credit operations, Mastul focuses on receiving donations from both individuals and corporations. The organization facilitates sponsorships for orphans housed and educated in its orphanages and madrasas. Sponsors contribute either annually or biannually for a specific child and, in return, receive progress reports and the opportunity to visit the child. Mastul's website is well-structured to manage donations, offering various options for contributors to support specific projects. Additionally, the platform allows for donations via mobile banking. Funds collected from corporate and individual donors are often outsourced to partner organizations for project implementation. In addition to donations, Mastul also generates income through event management services. Following the July 2024 political uprising and regime change, Mastul continues its activities, providing aid for flood victims, medical treatment for injured students, and relief efforts for Gaza, Palestine.

Technology Use: Mastul leverages a wide array of standard and digital technologies available to civil society organizations (CSOs) in 21st-century Bangladesh. The organization's website enables donors to contribute to their chosen cause with a single click. Mobile finance services and digital banking are also integral to their operations. Additionally, Mastul utilizes social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to raise awareness, increase connectivity, and attract donors. For internal management, Mastul employs email, WhatsApp, and Zoom for communication between staff members and volunteers, while regional offices and outsourced organizations are coordinated through virtual channels. However, the target demographic of Mastul consists primarily of underprivileged individuals, many of whom are not yet connected to the digital world. Consequently, Mastul relies on traditional, non-digital methods for communication, education, and training. Nonetheless, the organization makes efforts to incorporate technology wherever it is feasible.

Network: While the organization is open to collaboration with larger NGOs, it prioritizes partnerships that align with its mission and vision. In addition, Mastul often outsources projects to smaller organizations working in peripheral areas.

Political, Administrative, and Media Connections: Mastul asserts that it maintains a non-political stance and avoids political involvement. Nonetheless, political figures occasionally visit and donate to the organization. The organization also benefits from the support of dedicated sponsors and donors who hold influential positions within the political, administrative, sports and media sectors.

Challenges: As an organization that relies on digital platforms for fundraising, Mastul faces challenges related to online hate speech and fraudulent calls. To mitigate these risks, the organization exercises caution in handling negative circulation. Mastul also overcame early difficulties associated with its limited networks and inexperience, relying on the support of mature and influential donors to overcome initial hurdles.

Overall Evaluation: Mastul has emerged as a prominent and well-known CSO in Bangladesh, effectively utilizing technology to expand its reach globally and advocate for the welfare of underprivileged individuals and orphans. To date, the organization has helped 1,000 individuals achieve economic independence. Despite operating during a period when traditional NGOs faced significant challenges under the Awami League regime (Tasnim 2021; Lewis 2021), Mastul has thrived through professionalism and is now recognized as a respected, multi-functional charity foundation. Unlike many charity organizations, Mastul refrains from using distressing imagery in its online fundraising efforts. Instead, it features photographs of smiling, well-cared-for individuals and orphans on its website, underscoring its philosophy of not exploiting the suffering of others for financial gain. This approach serves as a model for the next generation of civil society organizations in Bangladesh.

Youth Policy Forum

Profile: The Youth Policy Forum (YPF) stands as the youngest, yet perhaps the most successful Civil Society Organization (CSO) among the case studies examined. Established in 2018, YPF has achieved remarkable success in advocacy and publicity over the course of its seven years. This advocacy organization, led by the astute students, and former students of Bangladesh, operates primarily through digital platforms. It is composed of youth from Bangladesh as well as Bangladeshi expatriates across the globe. A significant portion of its members—468 individuals—consists of Bangladeshi nationals contributing successfully outside the country, including followers and advisors to YPF. Guided by prominent national scholars and supported by a diverse group of senior fellows from various disciplines and institutions, YPF has made significant strides in promoting advocacy and public policy education among youth. Over 90% of the content, policy analysis, webinars, conferences, and course lectures organized by YPF in the past seven years have been conducted virtually.

This digital-first approach has allowed YPF to attract the attention not only of Bangladeshi youth worldwide but also of policymakers across different political

and administrative ideologies, as well as international agencies such as the World Bank and DFID. YPF's vision is to progress Bangladesh by making youth an integral part of the policy dialogue. Their mission is to foster sustainable policy reform through continuous advocacy, education, research, and collaboration with the next generation. YPF adheres to a protocol of political neutrality, mutual courtesy, and respect for diverse viewpoints (Collier 2024).

Network: YPF operates as a network-based organization. Over the past seven years, it has focused on building a network of policy-minded Bangladeshi youth, while simultaneously developing relationships with seasoned experts and scholars globally. The organization has also cultivated ties with political leaders, parliament members, opposition figures, and administrative elites as well as international actors. These international organizations approached YPF after learning about their work online (TBS 2022a; TBS 2022b). Currently, YPF collaborates with eleven national and international organizations and has four media partners.

Furthermore, YPF officially refers to its youth working groups on various policies as “policy networks.” The very base of the research and advocacy of YPF is embedded on networks (YPF Website 2024).

Funds: Although YPF started as a virtual organization with no initial funding, its growing activities required the establishment of a physical office in Dhaka and the hiring of both full-time and part-time staff, in addition to volunteer researchers. As a result, funding became a critical concern. Initially, YPF relied on subscription fees through crowdfunding, but later entered into joint projects with other organizations, which provided additional income. As the organization gained recognition among corporate and international entities, it was able to secure sponsors for conferences and seminars. However, YPF still lacks a permanent or stable source of income.

Technology Use: YPF's activities are heavily reliant on digital platforms. Compared to other new-generation CSOs, YPF has made extensive use of digital technologies for both organizational functions and management. For team collaboration, office management, and policy networks, common tools include Zoom, Messenger, and WhatsApp groups. YPF uses Stream Yard for Facebook live sessions and Google Suite for activity management. Among Bangladesh's new-generation CSOs, YPF is perhaps the most adept at utilizing digital technologies. YPF finds the necessary technical resource persons among its members and fellows.

Relationship with Politicians, Administration, and Media: As an advocacy organization, YPF must maintain connections with formal policymakers, including

parliamentarians and administrators. To avoid conflicts with government officials, YPF has strived to cultivate a neutral image among politicians and bureaucrats. The organization has sought parliament members and administrative officials sympathetic to its causes and invited them to participate in webinars. Additionally, YPF has offered some parliamentarians research assistance through its members. One of YPF's goals is to establish a research assistant system for parliament members, like practices in developed countries.

Its relationship with the media is also strong. In 2020, YPF was invited to participate in the popular Bangladeshi talk show *Tritiyo Matra* on Channel i, where they introduced their activities to a nationwide audience during the COVID-19 pandemic (Channel i October 4, 2020).

Challenges: Policy advocacy is inherently challenging, particularly when advocating for reforms that may conflict with the government's ideology. To avoid unintended confrontations with the government or political parties, YPF leadership organizes brainstorming sessions (online) with senior fellows prior to major events such as conferences. Despite these strategies, YPF has occasionally been accused of being an agent of the government or, conversely, of supporting opposition parties by the then ruling Awami League.

Furthermore, policy advocacy is not a particularly popular topic among youth in the digital world. As a result, YPF has not yet gained significant traction among grassroots youth in Bangladesh. Digital platforms alone are insufficient to inspire local youth, which is why YPF has initiated face-to-face workshops at the grassroots level, organized essay competitions on policy issues, and hosted annual in-person conferences.

Overall Evaluation: Despite being a relatively new, online-based organization, YPF has demonstrated professionalism and delivered quality work. A key factor in their success is their careful recruitment process. Most members are highly efficient and capable, and their contributions ensure that YPF's content and policy analysis are of high standard. The organization has gained a strong reputation, which enables it to engage in policy criticism. Another contributing factor to its success is that its target groups are well-educated youth who are adept at utilizing digital platforms.

In a time when democracy is on the decline globally, and governments are tightening restrictions on civil society organizations, YPF continues to thrive. Through its intelligent leadership and insightful members, YPF has managed to avoid extreme conflict while engaging in spaces where the government welcomes

constructive advice and feedback. Although seven years is a short period for a CSO, YPF has established itself as a neutral and dedicated organization.

YPF's maturity will be fully realized once it reaches grassroots youth and reflects the needs and aspirations of the youth in the Global South. As an advocacy organization, YPF became involved in the student anti-discrimination movement in July 2024, which ultimately led to the end of the Awami League regime. Core and grassroots members participated in street protests, and YPF issued an online memorandum condemning the government's brutality. Among the four case study CSOs, YPF is the only one to formally engage in the movement under its own name. During the new interim government, YPF is contributing directly to reform committees through its youth members and senior fellows.

Comparative Discussion on Case Study NGOs

Use of Digital Facilities: This section presents a comparative analysis of the case study CSOs in terms of their use of digital tools, alongside traditional and practical considerations that warrant attention.

It is evident that regardless of their types, all the CSOs have incorporated digital tools into their management, operations, networking, and outreach efforts. All four organizations, whether based in Dhaka or Rajshahi, and whether focused on service provision or advocacy, utilize digital facilities in line with their capacities. However, the approach to reaching their target populations differs between service-providing CSOs and advocacy organizations. YPF, for instance, has been particularly successful, as its target audience consists primarily of educated and socially aware citizens, many of whom reside in Dhaka or abroad. In contrast, YASC, based in Rajshahi, has attempted to engage its target audience through social media but has not achieved the same level of success as YPF.

For service-providing CSOs, whether based in Dhaka or Rajshahi, their target populations—comprising marginalized and impoverished individuals—remain largely disconnected from digital networks. Although all four CSOs utilize digital platforms and other technical tools for networking, the intensity of their usage varies. Dhaka-based CSOs often employ professionals and technical experts, while local CSOs generally rely on available, free resources.

Digital Divide and Location: The extent of digital usage varies significantly between Dhaka-based and Rajshahi-based CSOs. Dhaka-based CSOs tend to recruit technical experts or, at the very least, youths who are familiar with digital

technology. These organizations are more willing to invest in advanced digital tools that help expand their networks and enhance the reach of their activities. Additionally, the location of an organization significantly influences its network and funding capabilities, as discussed in the following sections. Furthermore, the level of inspiration to adopt digital technologies also differs greatly between CSOs located in urban centers and those in peripheral areas.

Funding: For CSOs, the ability to attract funding is closely linked to visibility and outreach. Dhaka-based organizations, such as YPF and Mastul, are more adept at promoting their causes to donors, government agencies, and corporations. These CSOs are ahead in utilizing digital tools for fundraising and financial management. They also have direct access to the headquarters of business corporations and government agencies, which facilitates their fundraising efforts. In contrast, local CSOs are often limited to contacting local branches of corporations, which typically require approval from central offices for donation-related decisions. Moreover, local business organizations are generally less affluent than their Dhaka-based counterparts and are less inclined to invest in social or environmental causes.

Skill Gap: Dhaka-based NGOs exhibit greater professionalism and career-oriented skill and leadership. YPF, like the Nobojagoron Foundation, is run by youth and students who are deeply engaged in policy-related work, and many of their academic backgrounds align with the organization's objectives. The executive committee remains stable, with leadership positions not changing annually, which contributes to organizational strength and sustainability. Similarly, Mastul, with its income-generating activities, can allocate a reasonable budget for technological and skill development. While the organization's student volunteers change periodically, the core executive committee remains consistent, fostering stability and continuity in decision-making and skill development.

In contrast, Rajshahi-based CSOs lack the financial and organizational resources to invest in skill development. While networking with other local youth organizations may provide limited technical and organizational skills, these opportunities are insufficient for substantial growth.

Leadership, Ideology, and Decision-Making: Leadership plays a crucial role in the development of CSOs, a factor that is universally relevant for both new and established organizations. The structure and formation of executive committees, as well as governing and advisory boards, also significantly impact the success of CSOs in achieving their objectives. For example, Nobojagoron Foundation's practice of

rotating leadership annually fosters democracy but can undermine consistency, as student leaders may vary in their skills and commitment.

In Rajshahi, the advocacy organizations are largely driven by youth who balance activism with their personal careers or businesses, treating their involvement as a voluntary, part-time commitment. Conversely, Mastul's founding leader and core team remain dedicated to the organization full-time, which has contributed to the organization's steady growth since its inception in 2012. The stability of leadership in Mastul has been instrumental in its expansion.

YPF exhibits a similar model, though most members and volunteers work part-time. Despite this, a few core members have remained involved since the organization's founding. Although the founding leaders now reside abroad, they remain highly engaged in the organization's activities, primarily through online communication, and prioritize YPF's causes. Such stable and dedicated leadership is vital to organizational growth.

Political Matters: All four CSOs emerged and developed under an autocratic regime, navigating a challenging and politically sensitive environment. They had to be cautious not to engage in activities that directly opposed the regime's interests or public image. They also had to maintain favorable relations with the administration and political powers. However, advocacy groups faced a higher level of risk in this regard. Service-providing CSOs, both in Dhaka and in peripheral regions, also had to be careful to avoid political involvement and instead cultivate relationships with influential political allies.

During the nationwide anti-regime protests in July 2024, for example, Mastul, Nobojagoron, and YASC refrained from publicly participating in protests under their official names. Instead, students and volunteers engaged in the movement on a personal basis. YPF, however, officially supported and participated in the movement under its name.

Conclusion

As Bangladesh undergoes a digital transition, the new generation CSO is also adapting to digital technologies. While these organizations have incorporated digital tools into their daily operations, the extent and nature of their use vary from one CSO to another. Advocacy groups, for instance, have successfully leveraged digital technologies to enhance their activities. However, the marginalized populations, who are the primary target groups for service-providing NGOs, remain largely

outside the digital sphere. This leads to service-providing CSOs limiting their digital engagement when interacting with these clients. This highlights a digital divide, not only in society at large but also within the CSO sector itself. The disparity between CSOs working in peripheral areas and the global network of YPF is stark, with a noticeable gap in terms of internet availability, digital skills, capital, and digital culture. The extent of this divide appears to be more profound than suggested by Lynn et al. (2022).

Regarding fundraising, a mixed picture emerges. Unlike the successful NGOs of the 1990s, which were heavily dependent on foreign donations (Lewis, 2019; Stiles, 2002), the new generation of CSOs has found alternative sources of income. These organizations are increasingly self-sufficient, moving away from micro-credit programs. Instead, they are raising funds through book sales, event management, and utilizing mobile banking, cloud banking, and online donation systems. Through these channels, they receive contributions from individuals and corporate donors, both domestically and internationally.

These new generation CSOs are pioneering digital engagement in Bangladesh and demonstrate notable differences from their predecessors. They face challenges from restrictive ICT laws. Additionally, registration rules and the NGO Donation Act have become more stringent over the past decade, limiting the operational space for CSOs, both online and offline. In this challenging environment, the case study CSOs have managed to perform well. However, an analysis of their success reveals that digital technology alone is insufficient for achieving their objectives. Traditional factors, such as leadership, ideology, mission, vision, dedication, and hard work, are equally crucial for these organizations to meet their goals.

It is important to recognize that the four case studies provide only a partial view of the broader landscape of civil society organizations adopting digitalization in Bangladesh. The overall process of digitalization among CSOs in the country remains unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, leading CSOs that have adopted digitalization, such as Mastul and YPF, are reaping the benefits of enhanced collaboration, information sharing, and participation in decision-making processes. These advancements may ultimately contribute to achieving the broader goals of democracy, good governance, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, much work remains to be done. It is crucial for the government and successful CSOs in central areas to support those in peripheral regions by facilitating the digitalization of society, particularly through skill enhancement and fostering a culture conducive

to digital adoption. The new generation CSOs are in their transitional phase in terms of digitalization.

Notes

1. Dhaka is the capital city of Bangladesh. Dhaka had been selected on the ground that is the center of all activities in the country. Naturally, Dhaka based CSOs also born, grow and flourish in a centric environment with all available facilities possible including digital technology in the country.
2. Rajshahi though considered as the center of the Northern Bangladesh, is 270 kilometers away from the capital Dhaka. The socio-economic development of Rajshahi lag far behind Dhaka in all aspects including the nature of implementation of the ICT policy. Internet, facility, skill and training though have been introduced here too but not comparable to the flourishing situation as in Dhaka.

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