



Beyond Relief: Empirical Evidence of NGOs' Transition into Disaster Governance in India

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ABSTRACT

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in India have historically been perceived as auxiliary relief providers during disasters. However, emerging empirical evidence demonstrates a paradigm shift: NGOs are evolving into **formal governance actors** across preparedness, coordination, policy, and resilience financing. Drawing on government reports, peer-reviewed publications, and real-world examples between 2013 and 2024, this paper argues that NGOs are increasingly embedded within disaster governance frameworks. Case studies from Assam (2022–23), Orissa (2022), Ratu River Bihar (2023) demonstrate their expanded roles in early warning systems, co-governance, policy advocacy, and financial mobilization. This study contributes a novel insight to disaster management literature: NGOs are no longer peripheral humanitarian agents but **co-governors of resilience** in India. Policy implications are discussed, with recommendations for institutional reforms, local funding mechanisms, and standardized governance frameworks to scale NGO participation without undermining autonomy or community trust.

Keywords: NGOs, disaster governance, India, resilience, early warning systems, co-governance

1. Introduction

India's geo-climatic vulnerabilities—encompassing floods, cyclones, earthquakes, and droughts—position it among the world's most disaster-prone nations. While the **Disaster Management Act (2005)** institutionalized structures such as the **National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA)**, the **State Disaster Management Authorities (SDMAs)**, and the **District Disaster Management Authorities (DDMAs)**, the scale and complexity of disasters necessitate a multi-stakeholder approach.

Traditionally, NGOs were perceived as ad hoc relief providers, stepping in to deliver food, shelter, and emergency healthcare. Yet, from 2013 onward, particularly after the Uttarakhand floods, evidence reveals a gradual transformation: NGOs are increasingly integrated into governance architectures, assuming roles in **early warning systems, policy consultations, inter-agency coordination, and long-term resilience building**. This paper examines this transition, drawing on empirical cases between 2013 and 2024, and argues that NGOs are becoming **co-governors of disaster management in India**.

2. Literature Review

2.1 NGOs in Global Disaster Governance

Scholars such as Walch (2019) highlight adaptive governance models where NGOs function as bridging institutions in disaster risk reduction (DRR). Lassa (2018) demonstrates how, under the Sendai Framework, NGOs are increasingly recognized as formal actors in DRR governance.

2.2 India-Specific Dynamics

In India, NGOs historically faced regulatory challenges and civic space restrictions. However, Syal (2021) shows that NGOs exercise agency by navigating these spaces, moving from “service contractors” to “policy influencers.”

2.3 Trust and Community Resilience

Trust is a critical determinant of effective disaster governance. Bonfanti (2023) demonstrates that communities with high trust in NGOs report stronger resilience outcomes. In India, this trust has enabled NGOs to step into

policy dialogue and community governance roles.

2.4 Research Gap

Existing literature has emphasized NGOs' relief functions but insufficiently examined their **institutionalized co-governance roles** in India. This paper addresses this gap through recent empirical evidence (2013–2024).

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design supported by secondary data:

- **Government Sources:** NDMA annual reports (2013–2023), MHA disaster statistics, and Aapda Mitra scheme documentation.
- **NGO Reports:** Goonj, Gram Vikas, AIDMI, and Sphere India publications.
- **Peer-Reviewed Publications:** Articles from *Disasters*, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, and *Voluntas*.
- **Case Studies:** Uttarakhand floods (2013), Kerala floods (2018), Assam floods (2022–23), Gram Vikas Orissa (2022), and the Ratu River cross-border early warning system (2023).

4. Empirical Findings: NGOs as Co-Governors

4.1 Early Warning Systems

- **Ratu River, Bihar, 2023:** NGOs facilitated a cross-border early warning system connecting Nepalese river data with downstream Indian villages. Trained volunteers relay warnings, allowing pre-emptive evacuations.

4.2 Community Governance Roles

- **Prayagraj “Apda Sakhiya” Initiative, 2024:** Forty-four women from Self-Help Groups were trained in disaster governance functions—early warning dissemination, first aid, and coordination. Unlike earlier volunteer programs, these women are **registered within district disaster control rooms**, marking a formal governance role for community-based NGOs.

4.3 Coordination Across Agencies

- **Assam Floods, 2022–23:** Save the Children and ActionAid operated child-focused shelters but also sat on SDMA coordination committees. NGOs managed logistics between district authorities, the Red Cross, and local health departments. This role transcended service delivery into **logistical governance**.

4.4 Policy Formation

- **AIDMI Advocacy, 2024:** The All India Disaster Mitigation Institute contributed to revisions of the National Policy on Mitigation and Rehabilitation, advocating for community-driven recovery mechanisms. Its evidence from Gujarat and Odisha was explicitly cited in NDMA working papers.

4.5 Resilience Financing

- **Gram Vikas, Odisha, 2022:** Mobilized INR 50 million through CSR and international donors to construct flood-resilient housing clusters. Importantly, Gram Vikas instituted **community water committees** to govern these funds, embedding resilience finance into local governance.

Table 1: NGO Co-Governance Roles in Flood-Related Disasters

Case/ Initiative	Year	NGO(s)	Primary Governance Role	Secondary Role	Outcome	Quantitative Metric
Uttarakhand Floods	2013	Oxfam; Save the Children	Inter-Agency Coordination	Relief Logistics	Thousands sheltered	NA
Chennai Floods	2015	Goonj; Red Cross	Relief Logistics	Community Mobilisation	Rapid urban relief	NA
Kerala Floods	2018	Sphere India (50+ NGOs)	Assessment & Policy Input	WASH Governance	Improved targeting	NA
Assam Floods	2022	Save the Children; ActionAid	Child-Safety Governance	Inter-Agency Liaison	Child-safety in SDMP	NA
Ratu River EWS (Bihar)	2023	Local NGOs	Early Warning Governance	Evacuation Protocols	Pre-emptive evacuation	64000 alerted
Gram Vikas Resilience (Orissa)	2022	Gram Vikas	Resilience Governance	Finance Water Committee Oversight	Resilient housing clusters	50000000 INR mobilised
Prayagraj Apda Sakhiya	2024	SHG-linked NGOs	Women-led Governance	Local Early Warning Activation	Integration into DDMA	44 SHG members

5. Discussion

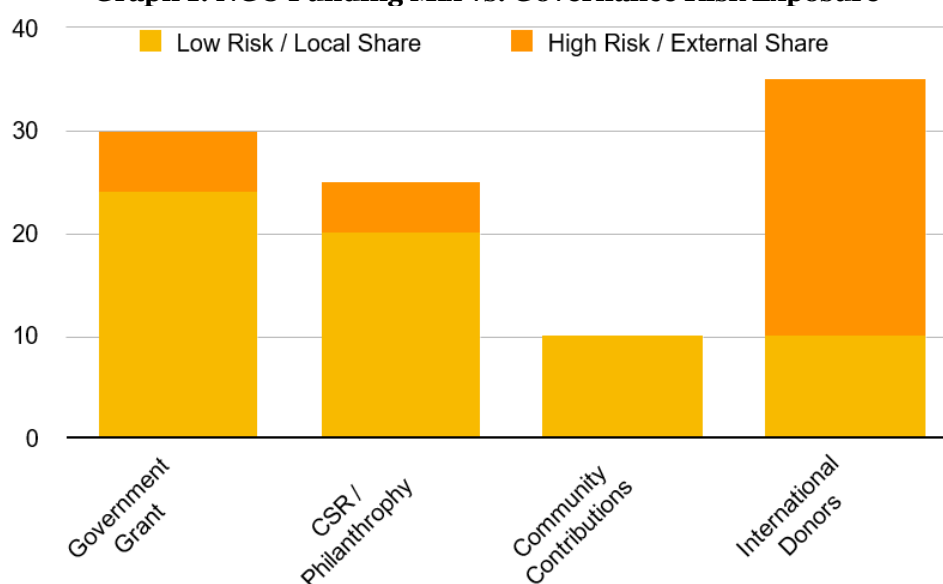
5.1 Merits of NGO's participation in Co-Governance

1. **Local Embeddedness:** NGOs' proximity to communities allows them to relay real-time information, enhancing state responsiveness.
2. **Policy Bridging:** NGOs like AIDMI insert community perspectives into national frameworks, democratizing policymaking.
3. **Resilience Investment:** NGO-led financial governance ensures funds are channeled toward locally identified priorities.

5.2 Challenges as NGO's scale participation in Co-Governance

- **Risk of Co-optation:** Critics argue NGOs may lose autonomy when absorbed into governance. Yet, evidence (e.g., Apda Sakhiya) shows NGOs maintaining agency while gaining legitimacy.
- **Funding Biases:** Heavy reliance on international donors raises concerns about vested interests shaping agendas. This is a valid critique, as some NGOs risk aligning more with donors than communities.

Graph 1: NGO Funding Mix vs. Governance Risk Exposure



5.3 Addressing Funding Challenges

To mitigate risks:

- Establish **domestic resilience funds** managed jointly by NGOs and government.
- Encourage **CSR–community partnerships** under transparent frameworks.
- Require **disclosure of funding sources** for NGOs in governance roles to safeguard neutrality.

6. Implications

6.1 Policy

Formalize NGO roles in disaster governance through MoUs, accreditation, and standardized protocols.

6.2 Practice

Train NGOs not only in relief but in **data management, early warning interpretation, and governance negotiation**.

6.3 Theory

This paper extends adaptive governance theory by highlighting NGOs as **institutional co-governors**, not peripheral actors.

7. Conclusion

NGOs in India are undergoing a transition from relief providers to **co-governors of disaster management**. Their contributions in early warning systems, coordination, policy formation, and resilience finance demonstrate a structural shift in governance. While challenges of funding dependence and coordination asymmetries persist, the institutionalization of NGO roles offers a pathway toward inclusive,

resilient disaster management in India.

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