

Nature of Civil Society Engagement in Environmental Movement in Bangladesh: From the Perspective of NGOs' Self-Evaluation

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Abstract Civil society is engaged in different developmental activities to ensure a sustainable environment in developing countries. Observers can see civil society participating in the environmental movement at both national and international levels in the South. Bangladesh is one of the most environmentally vulnerable developing countries and civil society may be actively involved in environmental protection, management, and development. The present study aims to trace the nature of civil society engagements in the environmental movement in Bangladesh. The study is qualitative research. Researchers analyzed data from a survey on 25 environmental civil society organizations, 10 key informant interviews (KIIs), and newspaper reports. Civil society activities have been analyzed particularly from three levels: policy level, media level, and grassroots level. The study findings show that civil society's involvement in environmental issues is more vivid at the grassroots and media levels than at the policy levels. Their influence on whether central or local political decisions are very weak. Civil Society needs to empower its capacity to play a decisive role in environmental policy decisions and the policy implementation process.

Keywords Civil society; Environmental movement; NGOs; Engagement level; Policy; Media; Grassroots; Bangladesh

Received: September 19, 2024

Revised: February 25, 2025

Accepted: March 19, 2025

Introduction

A robust civil society promotes democracy, checks the state's authority, and advances development (Howell & Pearce, 2001). Civil society is believed to be essential to advancing and preserving democracy (Diamond, 1999). So, it may be said that a vibrant civil society emphasizes citizen comprehension and participation in the democratic system, which helps to create an environment of accountability and transparency. While a vital civil society may have a variety of sound effects on democracy, this research demonstrates how civil society engagement in environmental movements, especially at three levels (policy level, media level, and grassroots level), leads to democratic governance and creating a sustainable environment for the citizens.

A component of civil society's participation role in the governance system is its engagement in environmental movements. Civil society works in environmental protection in different countries and ensures sustainable environmental governance (Banuri et al., 2002; Ahmed 2018). Concerns for ecological degradation have caught global attention since the 1960s and environmental social movements have emerged (Leonard, 2008). The variety of civil society organizations (CSOs) and the degree of their engagement shaped environmental governance, conservation, and protection (Rootes, 2009; Setianto & Widianarko, 2023). Developing and underdeveloped countries face several environmental threats due to the global environmental hazards caused mainly by the developed countries. Bangladesh has faced severe environmental degradation and natural capital loss over the past decades just like other developing countries. Economic loss from environmental dilapidation is approximately \$6.5 billion annually, 3.4 percent of Bangladesh's GDP. Air and water pollution caused nearly 28 per cent of deaths in Bangladesh (World Bank, 2023). Some development-related policies threaten the environment, such as, the Rampal power plant (Rahman 2013; Mustafa 2013, Islam & Al-amin, 2019), the Rooppur nuclear power plant, The Matarbari power plant, etc. Again, due to a lack of proper policy and inefficient environmental governance, new problems are arising in urban and rural areas. Biodiversity degradation, deforestation, urbanization, climate change impact, soil and river bank erosion, drought, pollution (air, water, and noise), and salinity are concerns of civil society in Bangladesh.

Despite various environmental rules and policies, civil society engagement in environmental movements, and collaborative activities with foreign donor NGOs the government has been adopting various development that conflict with environmental protection. These development projects go against the national and international sustainable environmental promises. Such circumstances raise the question: Can civil society play an effective role in the case of environmental protection in Bangladesh? To understand and investigate the actual situation, this research centers around the question, what is the actual engagement of civil society in the environmental movement? Accordingly, this research follows the methodical path of literatures review, identifying the research gap, developing research objectives, and collecting empirical data from the field to understand the nature of civil society engagement for environmental sustainability and development at different levels of the political system. This paper accommodates all these stages and the new findings, analysis, and recommendations.

A good number of studies have been conducted on civil society role, participation in the area of democratic activities, good governance and democratic transition (Diamond, 1999; Howell & Pearce, 2001; Hasan, 2015). Moreover, researchers have conducted numerous studies on social development in relation to civil societies (Islam & Ehsan, 2019; Mollah, 2020). However, few studies have emphasized civil society's engagement in with the environmental movement in Bangladesh. Although some existing literatures recognizes civil society role in environmental protection, there is a scope to investigate civil society engagement in environmental movement in contemporary Bangladesh.

Environmental CSOs have always chosen the path of movement against environmental degradation and environmental conservation (Djordjevic et al., 2012; Jahan & Zakaria, 2019). This research focused on the nature of civil society engagement in the environmental movement.

The main objective is to trace civil society's engagement in environmental movements in Bangladesh. The specific objective of the research is to explore the intensity of civil society engagement in environmental movement at different levels of the political system in Bangladesh.

Here, the findings were assessed using a structured questionnaire survey of 25 civil society organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs)¹, conversations with pre-arranged pertinent specialists, and the researchers.

This research found that civil society engagement at the policy level is still insufficient but has increased in the past, which differs from previous research. At the media level, civil society engagement on environmental issues is developing. Civil society's grassroots engagement is comparatively higher than other levels analyzed in this research.

The paper consists of two sections. The first section of this paper deals with the theoretical background and methodology of the research. The second section provides the findings and data analysis based on the conclusion.

Theoretical background

Civil society of individuals united by shared values, civic and public objectives, and voluntary, self-governing actions (Ikelegbe, 2013). The civil society formation has a wide range of objectives, such as social services, economic empowerment, environmental management, citizen health and welfare, and poverty alleviation; this has remained relevant over time. Civil society organizations consist of voluntary, self-generating, self-sustaining, and self-governing groups that are autonomous (Ikelegbe, 2005).

CSOs are expected to support democracy by building networks, engaging in civic activities, and interacting with market and political actors. In developing nations, a thriving civil society can support democratic consolidation in four main ways: civic education, interest articulation, monitoring the market and state machinery, and ensuring greater representation and participation of all societal segments in decision-making beyond the polls.

In addition, Linz and Stepan (1996) talk about the five main facets of a contemporary consolidated democracy: the governmental apparatus, civil society, political society, rule of law, and economic society. Each of the five domains has a distinct impact on and mode of interaction with the democratic system. The combination of political institutionalization, steady economic growth, the emergence of a democratic culture, and an engaged civil society is expected to enable democratic consolidation in Bangladesh. Civil society engagement in environmental movements, as part of participatory features, is expected to support democratic mobilization and environmental governance.

Participation includes the marginalized's knowledge, identities, and voices in social, economic, and political affairs that affect them (Mohanty & Tandon, 2010). This research considers the word 'participation' a synonym for the term 'engagement'. Civil society engagement includes advocacy for environmental justice, collecting, disseminating, and analyzing environmental information, providing input to agenda setting and policy development, evaluating environmental circumstances, participating in environmental governance, etc. Participation in protest programs, Pressure on key stakeholders, Advocacy/Lobbying, deepening citizen-centered environmental governance, Environmental impact assessment, program consent, public opinion, and media feedback are also recognized as forms of civil society engagement in Bangladesh's environmental movement. In addition to accepting the values of exchanges, competition, and consensus, civil society engagements uphold the values of diversity, plurality, compromise, tolerance, and cooperation. They also respect rights, citizens' freedom of action, and the power distribution among civil society groups and coalitions (Hall, 1995).

On the other hand, similar to previous social movements, the environmental movement aims to modify the existing social structure by promoting a more sensible utilization of the natural world by humans (Sills, 1975). Environmental movements are broad networks of individuals and organizations that engage in collective action to achieve environmental benefits (Roots, 1997c; Diani, 1992). Many scholars have analyzed theories such as Marxism, pluralism, neo-pluralism, corporatism, etc. Several theorists have employed the pluralism and corporatism theoretical models to explain the role of environmental civil society organizations and their relation to the state (Doyle & McEachern, 2008). The pluralistic view defines NGOs and civil society groups by their organization and roles as pressure groups, closely linking them to the pluralist interpretation of liberal democracy (Doyle & Doug McEachern, 2008).

Neo-pluralists deny pluralists and focus comparatively upon narrow interests. They are concerned about fluid competition and portray state-society relations. Corporatists focus on nationally organized, densely populated peak associations representing whole economic sectors (Koli, 2015). Timothy Doyle and Doug McEachern recognize two contradicting evaluations of the corporatist approach. On the one hand, some corporatist theorists consider this situation beneficial for civil society, because it entails the state's recognition of functional interest groups and their incorporation into the policy-making and implementation process. On the other hand, several theorists are concerned that this process threatens NGOs and that the state can incorporate and neutralize opposition (Doyle & Doug McEachern, 2008).

The postmodern theory of NGOs is helps explain the role of environmental civil society organizations. The key characteristics of postmodern politics are the erosion of the legitimacy of the nation-state as a unit of action and the subsequent emergence of other legitimate local, regional, and global levels of political action. The proliferation of political action units, such as grassroots organizations, public interest groups, or NGOs, is paralleled by the decline of traditional political parties (Princen & Finger, 1994). Based on these three theoretical models, the environmental movement in Bangladesh can be described as an organized social movement. The grassroots unity around resource distribution, equity, and democratic environmental decision-making. They consolidate the interest groups with competing interests, which coordinate with the government and international donor agencies.

The phrase "environmental movement" refers to a broad range of social, political, and scientific initiatives that address environmental challenges and encompass conservation and green politics (Nusrat et al., 2014). In the political context, the environmental movement focused on two broad aspects: the composition of its membership and the environmental problems it identifies and seeks to solve (Sills, 1975). This research includes environmental movements as environmental issues and problems rise, conservation, protection, and contribution to environmental policy execution.

Overview from historical and sociological roots

In Bangladesh, civil society is not a brand-new concept. It began about 240 years ago during the colonial era through cultural, religious, philanthropy, and political protests (Zafarullah & Rahman, 2002). Civil society was directly involved in several pivotal events in Bangladesh's political history, including the end of colonial rule in 1947, the language movement in 1952, the autonomy struggle in 1969, the war of independence in 1971, and the anti-authoritarian resistance in 1989–1990.

Civil society organizations use a variety of advocacy strategies, such as transformationalist, reformist, or conformist (Scholte, 2002). Civil society was not just about being a watchdog but also about taking political and social action. Civil society has often been in at the forefront of organizing large-scale movements to ensure rights to autonomy, democracy, self-rule, liberty, and language. A gradually developed civic sphere is expected to monitor state abuses and help combat exploitative political and economic interests in society. Similarly, NGO activities in Bangladesh have virtually

grown into a movement. Since the late 1970s, NGOs have steadily acquired increasingly prominent roles in the nation's development process (Islam, 2016). NGO activities have had a significant impact on poverty alleviation. Such activities include micro-credit and skill development training (on agricultural and non-agricultural income-generating activities); human resource development; rural development, including, improvement of rural infrastructure, women's development, grassroots institution building, and environmental project implementation (Davis & McGregor, 2000; Zafarullah & Rahman, 2002; Gemmill & Bamidele-Izu, 2002).

In Bangladesh, the 1980s saw the beginning of the environmental movement in its contemporary form. Certain international catalysts partially facilitated its inception. In Bangladesh, several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) developed an interest in environmental issues (Islam, 2018). Advocacy and environmental activism play a key role in creating timely policies and modifying the environmental policies that are currently in place. Civil society actively engaged in environmental movements in Bangladesh. For example, Rampal Power Plant and Save the Sundarbans (Shihab 2018; Huq 2020; Mukul et al. 2020), Biodiversity degradation and protection. Environmental risk assessment and management, climate change effect², river and water bodies pollution assessment and protection, Environmental pollution (air, soil, sound) and protection, deforestation, and conservation of forestland, natural disaster³, development, urbanization vs. environment. Besides, Bangladesh meets four distinct types of flooding: flash floods, riverine floods, rain floods, and storm-surge floods (Bhuiyan et al., 2024).

National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Ports, International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCD), Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA), Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA), Poribesh Bachau Andolon (POBA), and various national and international NGOs play significant roles as civil society organizations in Bangladesh's environmental movement.⁴ Previous researches also recognize civil society engagement as policy advocacy. An umbrella organization for protests and movements about the environment is Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA), while the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) does notable work in policy advocacy (Koli, 2015). These organizations have demonstrated remarkable leadership in the environmental movement. Through their publication on environmental research findings, national and international research institutes, also known as Think Tanks, have become involved in Bangladesh's environmental movement. In addition, a wide range of professionals, academics (Geologists, forest researchers and preservers, wildlife experts), and public members—particularly the younger generation contribute to Bangladesh's environmental movement through their writings. This study also analyzed to the engagement of civil society in the media.

This paper seeks to improve our understanding of the current situation of environmental movement in Bangladesh through civil society organizations, to understand better how to meet the imperative of engagement. A questionnaire survey and newspaper content analysis revealed how civil society engaged with the above-mentioned environmental challenges within Bangladesh's environmental movement. However, based on our theoretical, historical discussion and previous research, society is active on three levels: policy, media, and grassroots. Their nature and intensity are highest at grassroots level and low at the policy level.

This research developed based on the theoretical understanding and with the inference stated above. To apprehend the civil society engagement for environmental development in Bangladesh, the following conceptual frame work has been developed

Conceptual framework

Figure 1 shows a simple form, the conceptual framework upon which the study is based and plans to analyze the data. The nature of civil society engagement in environmental movements has been understood and explored in three levels: policy, media, and grassroots.

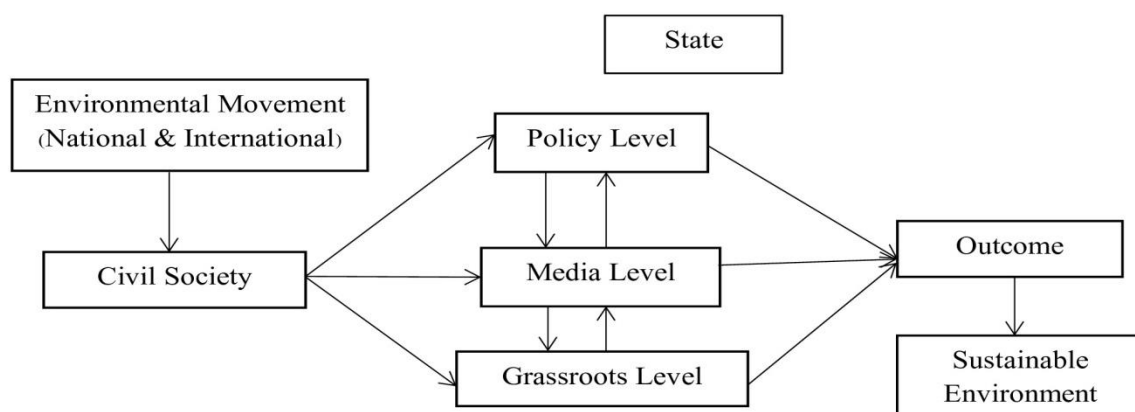


Figure 1 Conceptual framework

Source: Developed by the researchers

Bangladesh has a history of civil society engagement in environmental movement. Starting from the local level, civil society is working up to the national level and contributing to the overall protection of the global environment. Their engagement is shown in three levels facing environmental challenges and solving problems.

Through their engagement, this framework illustrates that civil society learns about environmental problems from the grassroots and community level. Again, to solve the environmental problems, civil society engages in awareness building among the communities, supporting community-based environmental programs and in implementing different environment-related projects on behalf of the government and international agencies.

The media helps to disseminate information throughout the nation. At the same time, it acts as a liaison between the citizens and the government. By engaging with such media, whether printing, electronic or digital, environmental civil society organizations target both the people, and the government for environmental awareness, education, and advocacy.

Finally, at the policy level civil society is active in influencing the government to make and breaking policies related to environmental development and sustainability. They are always trying to break the development policies that may ultimately harm nature and conflict with the environmental preservation programs. Moreover, they constantly are pursuing policies to ensure sustainable environment.

This means that ensuring a sustainable environment is the main outcome expected through such three layers of engagement. The present paper limits itself mostly to understanding the level of civil society engagement with such an objective. The outcome of the civil society in the environmental movement is not its concern. A separate paper will be prepared to understand and analyze the nature of this outcome.

Methods and materials

The study is empirical and qualitative. The study empirically examines the present scenario of civil society engagement in Bangladesh's environmental movement. This research is based on the view that empiricism is a valid approach to measuring reality and uncovering truth about the world (Bhattacharya, 2008). The present study applies qualitative approaches to ensure data reliability and validity. The required data and information have been collected from primary and secondary sources and analyzed accordingly. Researchers systematically selected twenty-five civil society organizations (Environmental NGOs) for an in-depth questionnaire survey. 10 KII have been conducted upon

responsible officials and key informants. Among them, three were environmental movement leaders, two were environmental CSOs (ECSOs) heads, one was a policymaker, and four were research professionals with ties to academia.

There are 118 NGOs currently working together in the name of Citizen's Platform for SDGs, in Bangladesh to contribute to the delivery of the SDGs and to enhance the accountability in its implementation processes.⁵ After analyzing the profiles of 118 NGOs and their official websites, researchers identified 25 NGOs that directly deals with environmental issues. Later, researchers observed that most of the NGOs were based in Dhaka, and some could not be contacted. Finally, researchers surveyed six NGOs out of the 25. Since the coastal and Varendra regions are facing more environmental disasters, Researchers purposively selected NGOs from these regions for the survey. In this way, it became possible to present a comparative picture of how NGOs are engaging in the capital, Dhaka, and how NGOs are engaging in the periphery for the environmental movement, which may provide a more realistic situation for the movement. Apart from the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, the rest of the NGOs (engaged in environmental issues) have been selected purposively from the websites providing lists of NGOs for Khulna⁶ and Rajshahi,⁷ region.

Table 1 NGOs selection for questionnaire survey

SL No.	Selected division of Bangladesh	No of NGOs
1	Dhaka (Capital City)	6
2	Khulna (Coastal Region facing the problem of Salinity)	9
3	Rajshahi (Varendra Region facing the problem of drought)	10
Total		25

Newspaper reports on environmental issues were also collected and analyzed to validate the surveyed data. The Daily Star (English version) and the Daily Ittefaq (Bengali version) newspaper have been chosen for newspaper analysis and the news was analyzed systematically using the content analysis method. Here, researchers collected reports from three different years, 2013, 2016, 2020.

Although three significant events have been chosen⁸ for selecting the times for newspaper collections, all news related to civil society and environment and those movements have been selected for content analysis during the specific time. From the newspaper analysis, 292 news articles have been found that are related to environmental issues and civil society.

Data from the questionnaire survey were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25. Descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution, percentage were provided by SPSS. To analyze the obtained data about the level of CSOs' engagement in selected variables, a five-point Likert scale⁹ has been used.

NGOs were selected purposively because there are no established private or government lists of Environmental Civil Society Organizations in Bangladesh. So, we had to focus on three divisions based on three criteria (NGOs dealing with salinity in the southern regions, NGOs dealing with drought in the Northern regions, and NGOs organizing from the capital city Dhaka) for the selection of NGOs. Though the respondent didn't cover all the regions of the country, their engagement attitudes helped to understand the position of civil society in the environmental movement in Bangladesh, both from the Centre and periphery or environmentally affected areas.

Table 2 Data collection pattern from newspaper

Sample Newspaper	Time Frame		Reasons behind the time selection	Major Investigative Convictions
	Year	Months		
The Daily Star and The Daily Ittefaq	2013	July-October	On August 1, 2013 the Department of Energy of Bangladesh approved the construction of Bangladesh India Friendship Power Company (BFPC), which is commonly known as The Rampal Power Plant. An environmental movement called 'Save the Sundarbans' took place then.	News and contents related to civil society, especially civil society engagement in environmental issues (biodiversity degradation, deforestation, urbanization, and climate change impact) and three movements have been collected from the sample newspaper in the selected periods.
	2016	January-April	On December 25, 2015, representatives of the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission and the Russian state nuclear corporation Rosatom signed the contract for the construction of the Rooppur nuclear power plant.	
	2020	May-August	In 2020, a number of CSOs (both national and international) raised their voice against The Matarbari power plant, which is a coal-fired power project in Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh. CS raised their voice because coal-fired power plants are the biggest contributors to carbon emissions and, therefore, one of the biggest obstacles to climate change mitigation efforts.	

Analysis framework

CSO operates from areas that fall between those of the state, the family, and the private sector. These organizations work to improve accountability and transparency while advancing good governance in developing nations. In addition to advocating for good governance, CSOs have grown to be significant players in the implementation of various national development initiatives and the provision of social services, which the states occasionally fail to provide for their populations (Mwenya & Mulubale, 2023). Based on the literature review and general understandings, three levels were used to conceptualize civil society engagement: a. policy level, b. media level, and c. grassroots level. Civil society organizations do not work or stay at one level or point of the political power system. Though most CSOs are active at the grass-roots level, some CSOs are able to move on to the upper level of the political process, while few among them even reach the policy formation level to influence the authority (Tsujinaka 2008). Coining the idea of Tsujinka (2008), this paper, considering the socioeconomic and political situation of Bangladesh, divides the working sphere of civil society into the grass-roots level, media level, and policy level. Moreover, it became apparent that civil society engages directly at the aforementioned levels following the completion of key informant interviews (KII).

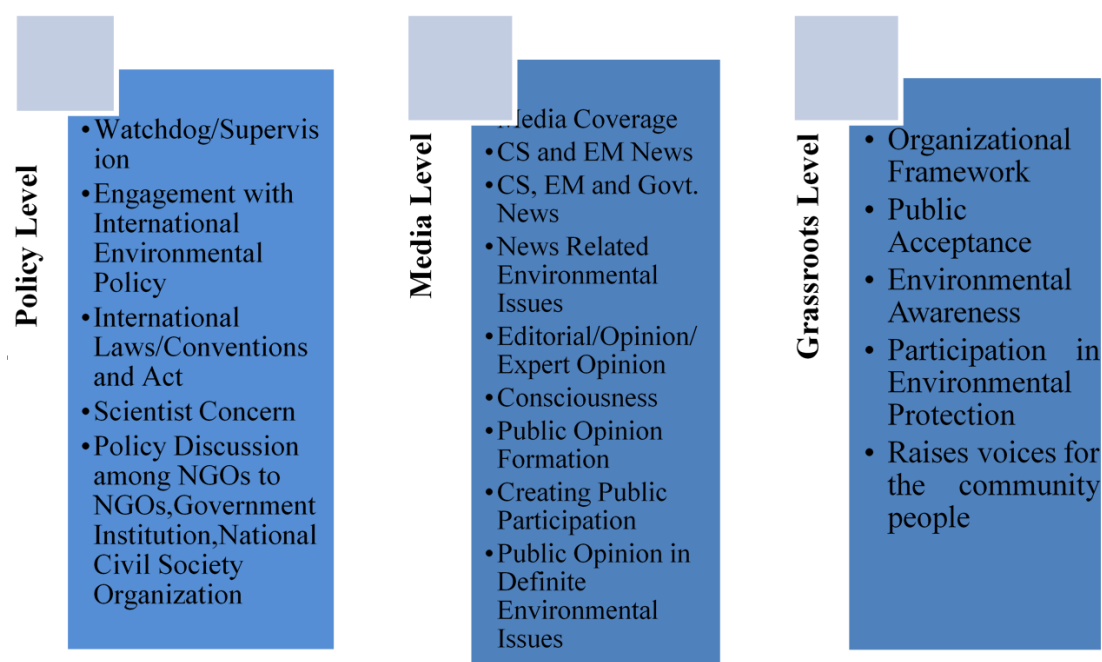


Figure 2 Nature of civil society engagement in environmental movement analysis framework

Source: Developed by the researchers

Basically, the nature of civil society engagement in environmental movements in Bangladesh is illustrated in Figure 2 from the perspectives of grassroots, media, and policy levels. CSOs work for the collective good and raise voices for the people at the government level. Media helps to accelerate the bottom-up approach of civil society. This research highlights civil society's engagement in Bangladesh's environmental movement based on these functions at the three levels.

Here, the policy level indicates government environmental policy supervision, new policy formulation, policy shifting, etc. Civil society engagement at the policy level is analyzed through indicators such as watchdog role, international laws, and convention analysis, incorporating scientists' concerns in national policy formulation and dialogue with national NGOs, prominent civil society

organizations, and the government. NGOs do this engagement both formally by attending meetings with government bodies and informally through various seminars, research report presentations, rallies, workshops, long march, etc.

Media level engagement in this research means civil society activities covered by both print and electronic media such as newspapers, radio, television, online portals, social media, etc. At this level, reports on environmental issues relating to civil society involvements have been considered as media-level engagement. Media level analysis indicators are classified as media coverage on environmental civil society, and environmental news on government collaboration with national, and international environmental NGOs, sub-editorial columns by civil society leaders, and all these activities accelerate the formation of public opinion and participation in environmental issues.

At the grassroots level, NGOs work more independently and are agents of implementing government projects. The grassroots level followed the indicators of organizational expansion and their acceptance of environmental activities. Besides this level of engagement, it was analyzed their intensity in environmental protection and how much they raise their voice for the grassroots.

Result discussion on policy level, media level, and grassroots level

The findings on different queries related to the three-level engagements in the environmental movement in Bangladesh are presented in this section. Discussions on the result follow the findings presented at each level.

Level of engagement at the policy level

Engaging in policy-level lobbying encompasses all forms of advocacy activities pertaining to overseeing current environmental regulations, developing timely new ones, and collaborating on their implementation. Civil society is fundamental both as a watchdog and a supporter of democratic reform (Hasan, 2015). The survey, inquired about civil society organizations' policy-level advocacy efforts. A certain level of CSOs engagement could be identified in this arena. Protests, writ petitions, strikes, webinars, national and international environmental day celebrations, debates, workshops, long marches, campaigns, human chains, conferences, rallies, workshops, round table meetings, memoranda, research report presentations, and so on are examples of phenomenal forms of engagement.

It has also been revealed that through these interactions, CSOs were able to establish connections with local political figures, government agencies, and the government for the purpose of creating and developing environmental policy. The analysis of the selected newspapers has reassured such facts. Table 3 provides the self-assessment of the NGOs about their intensity of engagement at the policy level in six different ways.

Table 3 Nature of engagement at the policy level (In Percentage)

Engagement Variables	High	Upper Middle	Middle	Lower Middle	Low
International Environmental Policy Engagement	24	24	48	0	4
International Laws/Conventions and Act	16	24	40	8	12
Scientists Concern	24	16	36	8	16
Organizational working relation, NGOs to NGOs	40	24	24	8	4
NGOs to Government Institution	40	24	24	8	4
NGOs to National Civil Society Organizations	44	24	28	4	0

Source: Field survey (2024).

Supervision and watchdog of environmental policy

Significant environmental policies¹⁰ are in place in Bangladesh to safeguard the environment. NGOs were asked whether they participated and acted as watchdogs, supervising or overseeing the implementation of existing environmental policies. It was found that, 68% of the NGOs admitted that they participate in environmental policy (Figure 3). At the same time, 32% was not concerned with such actions. Based on the positive replies, the study discovered that they are engaged in the government's environmental committee, steering committee, and environmental budget. This means that the government has also provided some space for the CSOs to engage in.

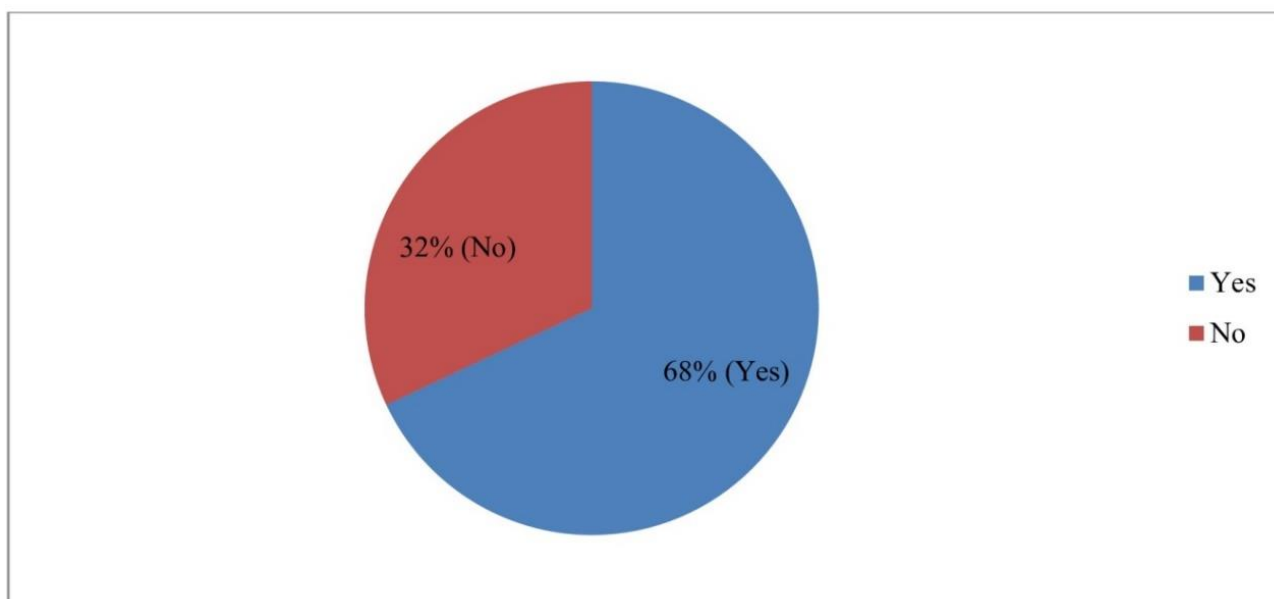


Figure 3 Advocacy engagement from respondent

Source: Field Survey (2024).

A key informant interview corroborates these findings. A prominent member of BAPA who is also the founder of Bangladesh Environment Network (BEN) stated that,

'We have a part to play in offering leadership at the policy level. BAPA cooperates with other organizations that are working on the environment. It actively participates in the environmental movement by advocating at the policy level with the government in the way of forming human chains, marches, rallies, and attending round table meetings, or they just openly protest against any action that undermines environmental protection.'

Newspaper analysis has also confirmed that different civil society organizations are in charge of overseeing and promoting Bangladesh's current environmental policy. NGOs are directly related to the supervision of the Bangladesh Environmental Conservation Act (Amendment 2010), the Bangladesh Environmental Policy 1992 (Roy, 2013), Bangladesh Environmental Conservation Act - 1995, Article 18 (A) (Monir, 2013), Brick Ready Kiln (Control) Law 2013 (The Daily Ittefaq, 2016). Environmentalist and civil society members often write their opinions on environmental policies in newspaper columns. The overview of the 'Biodiversity Conservation Law-2013' and the practical condition of 'Rampal Coal-based Power Plant' are highly discussed topics in this case (The Daily Ittefaq, 2013). They have criticized the non-implementation of the Biodiversity Conservation Act. Pointed out the risk of environmental pollution, particularly from noise, water, and soil pollution, as

well as the potential loss of biodiversity in the Sundarbans due to the construction of the Rampal coal-based power plant.

Engagement with international environmental policy

The environment and the environment movement cannot be contained inside a border. The interdependence of environmental issues compels a worldwide approach to their solution. As a result, numerous international environmental agreements and conventions have been negotiated in order to save the global environment. The civil society of today has expanded worldwide as well. Although it is generally believed that the boundaries of the state and civil society overlap, environmental movements expand the scope of civil society beyond clearly defined geographic restrictions (Khondker, 2001).

The Bangladeshi government makes agreements, and all local implementation processes are activated by civil society organizations, especially environmental NGOs in large part. Through these interactions, local and international NGOs become more partnered. According to the research findings, 96% of NGOs answered that they communicate with both national and international environmental civil society organizations. Overall, it is found that this kind of communication and engagement has aided in the accomplishment of organizational environmental objectives and continues to progress Bangladesh's environmental movement. It has been found that there is an increase in environment-related information through such cooperation. Partnerships and networks are built up, which helps with timely engagement at the environmental policy-making level in Bangladesh.

In Table 3, it was found that, only 24% of NGOs considered themselves to be engaged in such international interaction at a high rate. The majority of the organizations assessed that they possess insufficient understanding and oversight about international engagement on environmental issues. Regarding the inadequacy of most NGOs in Bangladesh's engagement with international environmental policy, a key respondent said that,

'In order to make environmental movements effective and fruitful, CSOs must have a clear understanding and engagement with the international environmental policies and the policies of Bangladesh. Through the combined knowledge of both of these policies, they will be able to engage in effective advocacy at the environmental policy level.'

This means that NGOs are in such engagements.

International laws/conventions and act

Previous studies have shown that Bangladesh has ratified a number of conventions and international agreements, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). Through the local implementation process, CSOs especially environmental NGOs play a vital role in implementing such agreements (Koli, 2015). According to Table 3, it is evident that only 16% of NGOs have a high level of engagement, 24% have an upper-middle level of engagement, and the majority of organizations (40%) were able to engage at a middle level.

Newspaper reports confirms that it Bangladesh is a signatory to numerous international environmental documents, such as the Ramsar Convention 1971, the Climate Change Convention 1992, the Biodiversity Convention 1992, and the Kyoto Protocol 1999 are notable (Haque, 2013). It has also been highlighted that the Rampal Power Plant was a source of worry for the Ramsar Convention Secretariat in 2011 as it threatened the famous mangrove forest in Sundarban of Bangladesh and India (Haque, 2013). These newspaper reports confirm that, environmentalists, experts and civil society members are active and vocal at the policy level regarding the international conventions. However, the extent to what extent such columns and recommendations can compel the national decision-makers to abide by that international convention is another matter to investigate.

Scientists concern

In addition to encouraging broad environmental literacy, CSOs offer policymakers scientific expertise and knowledge (Burgess, 2017). To accelerate advocacy efforts in terms of successful engagement at the policy level, it is also necessary to consider the opinions and suggestions of scientists. According to the survey, only 24% of NGOs address scientists' concerns at a high level (Table 3). However, we cannot expect the majority of NGOs to be engaged in such a role as this requires a huge budget for scientific experiments and experts. A key respondent (Naturalist) also agreed with this finding. He said that,

'Knowing the different components of the environment and the scientific concepts associated with the elements is necessary to be engaged with the environmental movement.' However, there is a lack of scientific understanding regarding the environment among Bangladesh's CSOs, particularly the NGOs that focus on environmental issues at the community level. Therefore, researchers frequently observe that they are unable to advocate for timely environmental policy formulation.'

Strong environmental think tanks or autonomous research groups have yet to be developed in Bangladesh. So, from the aspect of *scientific concern*, the NGOs here are in their initial years.

Environmental governance through organizational working relations, NGOs to NGOs

Civil society might offer a forum for representing group interests, giving previously marginalized people a voice and a way to become more powerful. Through the environmental movement, civil society actively articulates environmental issues by partnering with NGOs, the government, and other stakeholders. Therefore, NGOs occupy a somewhat ambiguous landscape that connects market-based operations, public service delivery coordinated by government and donors, and what can be considered civil society engagement (Davis and McGregor, 2000). Organizations dedicated to environmental activism play a crucial role in raising awareness of environmental issues and indirectly or directly influencing environmental governance at the local, national, and international levels.

The data analysis revealed that 52% of NGOs have excellent environmental working relationships with other NGOs, with 24% scoring in the upper middle and middle levels of engagement (Table 3). This data indicates that a positive networking outlook has developed among the NGOs.

NGOs to government institutions

Organizations from civil society, especially Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), are becoming more engaged in governance, resource management, and other decision-making processes. These NGOs are involved in community organization, service delivery, local engagement, and decision-making, applying the bottom-up approach. Regarding working relationships with government entities on environmental issues, 40% of the NGOs continue to have a high level of engagement with government agencies. Moreover, 24% of NGOs rated them in the middle level (Table 3). Not all NGOs can interact with the government or the authorities. Even so, such self-evaluation of the civil society gives a positive impression of their engagement.

NGOs to national civil society organizations

Environmental and local civil society plays a major role in global environmental governance. NGOs operating at the local and national levels play a crucial role in executing global environmental governance, as multilateral agreements and other international efforts rely on bottom-up approaches. From the perspective of the environmental movement in Bangladesh, the interaction between NGOs is stronger than the relationship between CSOs and the government. After analysis, researchers discovered that 44% of NGOs have excellent environmental working relationships with national civil

society organizations, while 24% score in the upper middle (Table 3). As a result of these associational engagement and communication, the NGOs' environmental perspectives, ideas, and activities are growing, ultimately accelerating the development, transformation, and supervision of the environmental governance at the policy level.

Nature of engagement at the media level

To understand civil society's engagement in the environmental movement, researchers have considered the media as a level for analysis. Civil society organizations are still crucial in upholding public officials' and political leaders' accountability and promoting the interests of the underprivileged and marginalized communities. Through their access to the media, they keep an eye on how national and local government representatives use and abuse their position, and act as a watchdog of the national service systems (Hasan, 2015). Civil society has also interacted with the media in environmental governance by engaging in environmental movements.

When asked how they relate with the media, most respondents said they frequently visit the press in their interest and sometimes get calls from the press for environmental events and occasions. This research considers local and national newspapers, print and electronic media, television, radio, social networking sites, personal websites, etc. as media. In response to the question of how civil society engages itself in the environmental movement at the media level, they said that when they see any environmental hazard or injustice, they contact the media and present the facts to the general public. In particular, social networking platforms give activists a forum to discuss environmental problems and launch online and offline movements (Sharma, 2014). Also, through press conferences, special workshops with journalists, dialogue with community radio, and environmental work campaigns, CSOs create awareness among the general public about environmental issues, form public opinion, and increase people's participation in the environmental movement.

Table 4 Media level engagement (in percentage)

Engagement Variables	High	Upper Middle	Middle	Lower Middle	Low
Civil Society and Environmental movement News	28	40	20	12	0
Civil Society, Environmental movement and Government News	28	36	24	12	0
News related environmental issues	24	36	32	8	0
Editorial/opinion/expert opinion	20	28	24	28	0
Creating Public Consciousness	60	20	12	8	0
Creating Public Participation	56	16	16	8	4
Creating Public opinion in definite environmental issues	44	32	12	8	4

Source Field survey (2024).

Table 4 provides the NGOs' self-assessment of their engagement with the media on environmental issues. We shall discuss the findings under seven sub-headings.

Civil society and environmental movement news

When the media cover the environmental movement, the issue of engagement from civil society comes up. The survey reveals that, 28% of the NGOs are strongly engaged in environmental news. 40% of the NGOs positions are in the upper middle, and 20% of the NGOs position are in the middle level. This indicates a strong relationship between civil society and the media on environmental issues.

Civil society, environmental movement, and government news

Damoah and Adu (2022) explored that CSOs pressure the government to continue being transparent with the public and reform its policies. In this role, they inform the public, organize and mobilize citizens, and pressure the government via public relations stunts, media coverage, petitions, and protests. Furthermore, they enforce restrictions through formal civic acts. When asked about the degree to which civil society and the government are engaged in the combined news through the media, 28% of the ENGOs answered that they were in a high position (Table 4). 36% of ENGOs reported being in the upper middle, and 24% identified their positions at the middle level.

News on environmental issues

Civil society organizations assist the public in developing well-informed policy preferences. By providing citizens with information on issues that interest them, they enable them to become what Boix and Posner (1998) have called 'sophisticated consumers of politics' (Burstein & Linton, 2002). Many NGOs and their leaders actively participate in the environmental movement by voicing their opinions in the media many research institutes (Think Tank) and various NGOs review and present reports on environmental issues. By providing opinions, criticizing, and recommending various government actions, the general public and civil society are involved in environmental movements in Bangladesh using the media.

The research revealed that when it comes to NGOs interaction with the media in reporting on the issue underlying environmental movements, 24% of NGOs consider themselves to be engaged at the high level, 36% at the upper middle level, and 32% at the middle range (Table 4). From such numbers, we can infer that though not all such NGOs are engaged in advocacy, those involved in environmental advocacy use the media as a means.

Engagement through editorial/opinion/expert opinion

Civil society organizations can play a significant role in the opinion-policy linkage process by disseminating information and informing policymakers about public preferences. According to the questionnaire survey, 20% of NGOs are very much engaged in the environmental movement at the media level by offering their perspectives. Regarding expressing their opinions in the media, 28% of NGOs were in the upper middle, 24% were in the middle, and 28% were in the lower middle (Table 4). Among the 292 sample newspaper articles used for content analysis, 101 were editorials or sub-editorials written by environment experts or activists. Writing columns on in newspapers has become a universal way of advocating and appealing to the government and the public.

Knowledge building through consciousness

Civil society has an effective role in environmental movement through knowledge creation on environmental issues. The literature review shows that, knowledge fabrication, interpretation, and dissemination are closely related to civil society organizations and civic practices (Suarsana, 2022). CSOs are raising consciousness among the general public about the environmental movement. Media is one of the ways to increase environmental awareness and knowledge among the general public. The research found that 60% of surveyed NGOs are highly engaged in increasing knowledge and awareness

about the environmental movement through the media level (Table 4). 20% of NGOs were engaged in the upper middle, and 12% reported a middle position in creating knowledge about environmental issues.

Creating public participation

Increased motivation and the capacity to engage in political events are indicators of participation, which translates into a broader interest in politics. In this particular context, civil society is regarded as a school of democracy because it actively supports the consolidation of democracy by appointing democratic elites to positions of decision-making authority (Ungreanu & Nemtoi, 2022). In Bangladesh, civil society fosters public participation in environmentally friendly activities by engaging with the media at a high level. The study found that 56% of surveyed organizations have high engagement in creating public participation through the media. Here, they use electronic media, the press social media, and the digital world.

Creating public opinion on particular environmental issues

One essential component and objective of modern democratic government is incorporating citizen preferences into the accepted policies. Because of this, a significant portion of the literature in political science focuses on examining the relationship between opinion and policy (Rasmussen & Reher, 2019). The present study found that civil society activity shapes public opinion on specific environmental issues. The study found that 44% of NGOs were able to create a strong position in shaping public opinion on specific environmental issues. 32% of NGOs were in the upper middle, and 12% of NGOs were in the middle level of engagement (Table 4). The environmental issues that have the highest relevance through the questionnaire survey are enhancing the movement against forest extinction and sapling plantation programs, climate change vulnerability mitigation and resilience, and protection of coastal areas. Moreover, they are working with the media on these issues.

From media-level engagement, NGOs are comfortable giving opinions in media, doing workshops with reporter to generate public awareness, and publicizing their environmental activities.

Nature of engagement at the grassroots level

Development experts view community engagement as the key to sustainability, and demand for it may be growing as top-down development approaches have often fallen short of expectations (Kamruzzaman, 2013). By opposing the prevailing strategy, civil society can speak for local voices and address issues like salinity intrusion, drought, irregular flooding, biodiversity loss, and river bank erosion (Hossain, 2017). In their capacity as civil society representatives, local NGOs learn about the community's problems, including unemployment, illiteracy, maternal mortality, and malnutrition, to improve their human rights situation. These NGOs also advocate for local issues such as environmental governance, sustainability, and conservation. During the survey, researchers asked respondent NGOs about the nature of their engagement at the grassroots level.

Table 5 suggests that NGOs engage at the grassroots level in various aspects. We shall discuss such engagement from four different sub-headings.

Organizational expansion

Organizational expansion is how NGOs expand geographically according to the growth of their beneficiaries and the recognition of these organizations concerning environmental issues. They may have to increase the number of their branch offices or satellite stations at different parts of the localities according to need. It is a widespread practice for local NGOs to address community specific issues and concerns (Hossain, 2017). Researchers asked the NGOs about their organizational expansion to the community. From this question, the study found that their expansion level is pretty high as an

environmental organization. 44% of NGOs reported that their organization intensively worked on environmental issues at the grassroots level (Table 5). For example, Uttaran supports the Paani (water) Committee, a local civil society organization (under survey) that promotes salinity-free drinking water and local rainwater harvesting for sustainable water management in local communities. This committee is closely involved in Tidal River Management, a significant endeavor to lessen waterlogging in the southwest, in close collaboration with local communities, especially Satkhira, Khulna, and Bagherhat districts under the Khulna division. Uttaran highlights the Multi-Stakeholder Forum (MSF) as a tool for managing river water resources regionally and for lowering ecological hazards as part of this process (Field Survey).

Table 5 Grassroots level engagement (In percentage)

Engagement Variables	High	Upper Middle	Middle	Lower Middle	Low
Organizational expansion at Grassroots Level	44	40	12	0	4
Public Acceptance	48	36	12	0	4
Environmental Awareness Building	56	24	20	0	0
Participation in Environment Protection	52	24	16	4	4

Source: Field survey (2024).

Public acceptance

The issue of public acceptance comes to analyze the engagement of civil society at the grassroots level. As representatives of civil society organizations NGOs have intense communication with the grassroots community. The survey reveals that 48% of the NGOs think that their acceptance among the community to work on environmental issues is high (Table 5). However, it is their self-evaluation. Moreover, during the field visit, one of the researcher also found that NGOs provide financial and technological support for the grassroots communities who are at risk of environmental hazards. Moreover, one key informant described (a Movement Leader),

'Acceptance of civil society at the grassroots level has increased. We discuss the environmental problems face to face with the local communities. They listen to us and try to engage all stakeholders in the implementing environment-related projects'.

Environmental awareness building

At the beginning of the new millennium, researchers observed that CSOs saw a rise in individuals' interest in ecological activism as a means of resolving both general and particular issues. This implied the existence of responsibility and raised public awareness (Djordjevic et. al., 2012). By raising awareness, environmental civil society organizations connect residents to the national environmental movement and empower them on environmental issues. The survey analysis found that 56% of NGOs rated their engagement in raising environmental awareness at the grassroots level as high. In this regard, 20% of NGOs are in an average position, while 24% are in the upper middle (Table 5). It is evident from these figures that civil society's grassroots engagement in raising environmental awareness is in a far better position than other indicators.

Participation in environmental protection

The World Bank (2001) claimed that greater public participation improves public policy inputs, lowers bureaucratic sclerosis and corruption, and boosts public accountability (Kamruzzaman, 2013). This participation is not limited to those from underprivileged and impoverished backgrounds. Instead,

the bank appears to be pursuing ‘stakeholder participation,’ or engagement above this threshold. The present research also found that about 52% of NGOs are highly engaged in the environmental movement at the grassroots level (Table 5). A key informant interview contended that

‘There has been a rise in the involvement of civil society organizations in local environmental issues, particularly in the Varendra region,¹¹ the Haor areas,¹² and the coastline parts. Through local government, civil society organizations are interacting with members of the community, promoting capacity building, and amplifying the views of the people.’

Such grassroots engagement indicates that bottom- up approaches do build effective environmental movements.

Discussion

Since the 1990s, Bangladesh has experienced significant social development largely due to the proactive engagement of civil society organizations. It has been observed that civil society engaged actively in the environmental movement in Bangladesh, too. Civil society does not become agitated over a single environmental issue since the numerous elements of the environment are linked. Civil society engagement in the environmental movement has changed in response to different issues and conditions. The present research has analyzed its findings on civil society engagement from three aspects: policy level, media, and grassroots.

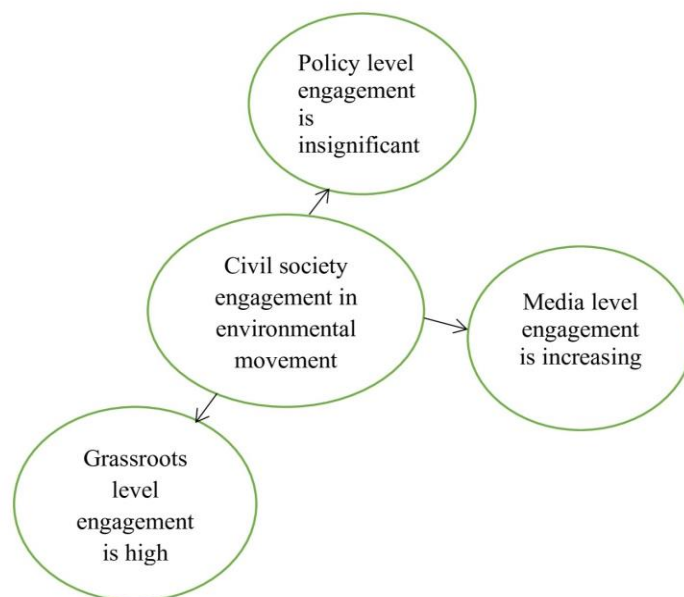


Figure 4 overall findings on mind mapping

Source: Developed by the researchers

Within this framework, civil society involvement in the policy process is still insignificant (Table 3). It confirms the findings of Koli (2015), who showed that, a limited number of functional groups directly or indirectly work within the environmental policy- making process with the government and international organizations. This means there has hardly been any progress on the issue in the last nine years. However, this research found that, 96% of the NGOs communicate with national & international CSOs from an environmental perspective, partially contradicting Koli’s findings. So, it can be said that CSOs has changed their communication boundaries expanding from

the past networking to include international connections. Khondker (2001) also recognized that environmental movements expand civil society's scope beyond their clearly defined geographic restrictions.

The media level, civil society's involvement in environmental issues has risen in recent times. Sharma (2014) and Hasan (2015) also showed that with their access to the media, civil society keeps an eye on the overall political system. They do this to access and provide environmental feedback to government organizations. Civil society's grassroots engagement is comparatively higher than other levels analyzed in this research. Engagement in environmental awareness building (56%) and participation in environmental protection (52%, Table 5) are especially remarkable. Koli (2015) and Jahan and Zakaria (2019) also showed that, some prominent CSOs led environmental movements. They were connected with the local people and environmentalists to reach their goals, especially for connecting with the local community.

In a summary, civil society educates the public about environmental issues, hazards, and degradation; it collaborates with the media to communicate its message to decision-makers in government and the general public, and in shaping public opinion through environmental education and awareness initiatives. All of these activities separately refer to the engagement of civil society at the policy level, media level, and grassroots level in the environmental movement.

While significant, civil society engagement in the environmental movement in Bangladesh faces several obstacles that hinder its effectiveness. These challenges are often structural, political, and social. Some key weaknesses include: limited resources and capacity; political influence and interference; lack of coordination among stakeholders; limited public awareness and engagement; weak legal and institutional frameworks; vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters; socioeconomic barriers, dependency on international funding etc. Lewis (2015) and Islam (2018) also claimed that civil society in Bangladesh is often politically polarized, which is inhibiting their autonomous power to bargain with the authorities. Political influence and interferences often hinder their necessary resources and hinder their grassroots activities. Nevertheless, we must admit that civil society has been crucial in promoting environmental conservation in Bangladesh, which has taken place so far; yet, it is encountering enormous challenges. To ensure sustainable engagement of civil society in the environmental movement, these obstacles need to be addressed through strategies and network bonding.

The inclusion of civil society in the environmental movement and the nature analysis by this research would significantly contribute to filling knowledge gaps, enhancing knowledge development, increasing interest, and promoting engagement.

Conclusion and recommendation

To sum up this study's findings corroborate the assertion, that, NGOs engagement with NGOs, government institutions, and other national civil society is much better than advocating environmental policy formulating, and incorporating environmental laws, conventions, and scientists' concerns. At the media level, environmental news publication and opinion sharing are poor. However, environmental awareness creation, raising public consciousness, increasing public participation, and public opinion on definite environmental issues are scored high. Based on NGOs self-evaluation and the opinions of pertinent key informants, civil society's engagement with Bangladesh's environmental movement is greater at the grassroots and media levels than at the policy level. The aim of this study, which was to determine how civil society is engaged in Bangladesh's environmental movement, has been effectively met.

Our subsequent study shall explore ways to ensure the effective contribution of civil society to the environmental movement. However, based on the findings of the present paper, we can momentarily recommend that the socio-political obstacles to the NGOs' effective engagements be

overcome. On the other hand, the NGOs should give attention to their organizational weaknesses and stress on committed leadership. At the government level, environment-related structures, like the ministry, bureau departments, and local governments, should provide enough space for civil society to participate in the decision-making and project implementation process. Necessary steps should be taken to create a platform for interactions where government authorities can respond to the public regarding submissions, petitions and suggestions made by NGOs. Interactions and understanding between the authorities and the NGOs may contribute to effective and productive civil society engagement not only at the policy level but also at the media and grassroots level.

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¹ A summary of the politics, economy, and civil society associated with Bangladesh's historically constructed and politically grounded development approach is provided by David Lewis (2011). In the liberalization and stabilization approach to economic development based on foreign aid, NGOs are significant supporters to address the different concerns including climate change, ecological vulnerabilities, and human rights. Details at Anwar Hossen. ``Bangladesh: A quest for civil society on environment and human right,``. In *Routledge Handbook of Civil Society in Asia*, pp. 264-277. Routledge, 2017. The questionnaire survey for this study was completed with the understanding that environmental NGOs are a type of civil society organization

² Climate change effect issue includes climate change vulnerability, global warming, climate change finance and fund management etc.

³ Natural disaster includes flood, cyclone, arsenic, salinity, drought, waterlogging, and pandemic also.

⁴ In addition to the organization, newspaper analysis identified other participants in the environmental movement in Bangladesh: BRAC, Action Aid Bangladesh, NAARI, Plan International Bangladesh, Water Keeper Bangladesh, Sujana (Sushashoner Jonno Nagorik), Nijera Kori, CPD (Center for Policy Dialogue), TIB (Transparency International of Bangladesh), etc. A questionnaire survey was conducted in some of these organizations.

⁵

https://bdplatform4sdgs.net/partners/?fbclid=IwAR3Yh6eivHMk1jt3dtlRGWoLM-W7ivre7RvHGqeNDD_0ZbyP480hqMRz-# accessed 23 June 2023.

⁶ Bangladesh National Information Centre, Khulna Division (The NGOs list is prepared by cabinet division). Nine NGOs (between 89 NGOs) purposively selected among the list which are working in environmental issues. <https://www.khulna.gov.bd/bn/site/page/kN4V-%E0%A6%8F%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%93> accessed at 27 January 2024.

⁷ Bangladesh National Information Centre, Rajshahi Division. (From the Rajshahi NGOs website 10 NGOs (between 92) were purposively selected for the survey. https://www.ngosrajshahi.com/Ngos/list_of_ngos accessed at 27 January 2024.

⁸ Another separate paper is on the way of writing focusing on the three national environmental events and the role of the civil society.

⁹ Likert scale can provide a clear way to measure the intensity or agreement/disagreement level with certain statements, thus helping researchers capture a range of perspectives. Accordingly Likert Scale has been used to measure engagement attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of respondents towards environmental movement in Bangladesh.

¹⁰ For example, Environmental Policy 1992 and Environmental Action Plan 1992, National Environment Management Plan 1995, Bangladesh Environmental Conservation Act (ECA) 1995, Bangladesh Environmental Conservation Rules (ECR) 1997, National Water Policy 1999, Environmental Courts Act 2000, and Industrial Policy 2005 are notable.

¹¹ Varendra or Varendri, an ancient geographical unit co-extensive with the ancient janapada of Pundra or Pundravardhana in the northern districts of Bangladesh, situated in the old Pleistocene land formation, the barind tract. For detail, <https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Varendra>

¹² A huge, bowl-shaped geological basin is called a haor, or wetland. In Bangladesh, haors serve as water storage areas during the monsoon season, collecting water from canals and rivers before drying up in the summer. In Bangladesh, the most Haors are found in the divisions of Sylhet and Mymensingh.