

The Role and Impact of NGOs in Strengthening Public Health in India

K.Guru suriya¹, Dr. M. Jeyakumari²

¹Ph.D Research Scholar,(full-time), PG & Research Department of History, V.O.
Chidambaram college, Thoothukudi
gurusurya1108@gmail.com

²Guide&Assistant Professor, PG & Research Department of History, V. O.
Chidambaram college, Thoothukudi

Abstract

India's healthcare system continues to face significant challenges, including low public funding, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to high-quality services for underserved populations. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become vital partners in addressing these gaps by complementing government initiatives with innovative, community-based health solutions. This study explores the roles and impacts of NGOs in improving public health in India, focusing on their diverse contributions to preventive care, maternal and child health, nutrition, communicable and non-communicable diseases, and cancer care. Case studies of prominent NGOs—such as Doctors for You, Rural Health Care Foundation, Swasth Foundation, Foundation for Mother and Child Health, CanKids Kidscan, Swasthya Swaraj, Aarogya Seva, MAYA, SEARCH, and Arogya Mandal—illustrate their unique approaches, which range from palliative cancer support and tribal health empowerment to disaster relief and affordable primary care. The report highlights how NGOs not only provide essential healthcare services but also empower communities, reduce out-of-pocket expenses, and drive systemic change. Due to their flexibility and grassroots engagement, especially in underserved rural and tribal areas, NGOs play a crucial role in addressing healthcare inequities. To create a more inclusive, sustainable, and equitable public health ecosystem in India, it is imperative to strengthen collaborations among the government, NGOs, and local communities. Reason: The revision improves clarity, flow, and readability by restructuring sentences and enhancing vocabulary. It corrects punctuation and spacing errors, such as adding a missing space after a period. Technical accuracy is improved by specifying

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Introduction

Low public investment, inadequate infrastructure, and unequal access to services—particularly for underserved populations—are significant challenges facing India's healthcare system. These issues were highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when healthcare spending amounted to only about 1% of GDP. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a crucial role in bridging this gap. Operating across diverse fields such as nutrition, cancer treatment, infectious diseases, maternal and child health, and tribal health, NGOs work at the local level to develop innovative health solutions, raise awareness, and provide affordable services to marginalized communities. Their adaptability and community-based approach enable them to complement government programs and alleviate the burden on public health institutions. This article highlights the contributions of organizations such as Doctors for You,

Rural Health Care Foundation, Swasth Foundation, CanKids, Swasthya Swaraj, and others that are transforming healthcare access and delivery. It examines the impact of NGOs on public health in India.

The Impact of NGOs on Public Health in India

Lack of access to high-quality services for underprivileged and marginalized people in India has been one of the major challenges facing the country's healthcare system. This is primarily due to public healthcare spending being extremely low—just 1% of GDP—making it one of the lowest in the world. The COVID-19 pandemic placed significant strain on the healthcare system and exposed its weaknesses. However, numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are identifying the root causes of healthcare issues and developing innovative solutions. These organizations work in various areas, including nutrition, early disease detection, treatment of communicable diseases, and maternal and child health. NGOs are non-profit organizations that operate independently of government influence. They can function locally or globally to promote social or political change. Approximately one out of every 100 organizations involved either directly or indirectly in health care operates a hospital. Comparable figures for health system support services and outpatient clinics are approximately 11% and 9%, respectively. Approximately 84% of NGOs participate in outreach initiatives. For more than 60% of NGOs primarily focused on the health sector, outreach constitutes their main health activity.

One of the most notable characteristics of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is that they are private institutions serving the public interest (UN, 2003). Around the world, they are known by many different names, including nonprofit organizations, third-sector organizations, community-based groups, benevolent organizations, and voluntary organizations. Although their focus and nature have evolved over time, NGOs have become increasingly prominent across various fields, including social, cultural, scientific, and economic spheres. Today, in nearly every country, the non-governmental sector is recognized as a significant social and economic force. The political economy literature clearly explains the importance of the growing non-governmental sector through theories of market failure and government intervention. Sociological research highlights NGOs as crucial institutions that enhance social integration and serve as essential components of democracy. The health sector also demonstrates a favorable attitude toward the non-governmental sector.

According to the World Health Organization, NGOs are increasingly recognized for their ability to support government initiatives and effectively represent the public's needs and expectations regarding health services. Many countries worldwide have enabled NGOs to participate in healthcare delivery by adopting a decentralized framework to improve the health sector's performance.

However, the activities of NGOs in the healthcare sector are closely linked to the unique characteristics of each nation, including its level of civilizational development, institutional structure, culture and traditions, needs, and resources. In high-income countries, NGOs tend to be more specialized, primarily focusing on clinical research, health advocacy, and lobbying. In contrast, in low- and middle-income countries, NGOs often concentrate on preventive initiatives, awareness-raising, and service delivery.

Doctors for You

In 2007, a group of doctors, medical students, and others who shared the goal of "health for all" founded Doctors for You (DFY). Operating in 17 different Indian states, DFY is involved in various programs that include social work, healthcare services, and disaster management. The organization reaches out to those affected by years of injustice, neglect, natural disasters, and extreme poverty. Their primary goal is to address the affected communities' dietary and medical needs. They have extensive expertise in working to reduce disease processes and strive to promote maternity, newborn, and child health, as well as sexual and reproductive health in emergency situations. DFY has been recognized for its exceptional humanitarian work with awards such as the Golden Ruby Award (2015), the British Medical Group Award (2009), the SAARC Award and honors from various and governments. work.

Rural Health Care Foundation

Since 2009, the Rural Health Care Foundation (RHCF) has been working to improve healthcare by offering high-quality, affordable primary medical care to low-income and disadvantaged populations in West Thengat. Their goal is to provide healthcare to the most underprivileged and impoverished groups. Twelve of the 17 RHCF centers are located in isolated rural areas of the state. Their objective is to continuously enhance the lives and health of those who are marginalized and face financial and social obstacles. In addition to providing a week's supply of free medication, their healthcare centers offer patients reasonably priced medical consultations. To date, the RHCF centers have treated more than 2.3 million patients.

Swasth Foundation

The goal of Swasth, founded in 2009 with the motto "and Joy for All," is to create an accountable and sustainable health ecosystem. The organization's network of primary healthcare facilities offers affordable services that reduce out-of-pocket costs by more than 50% for those in need. The centers primarily aim to enhance individuals' physical, social, mental, and emotional well-being. To achieve this, they implement interventions such as workshops, classes, courses, and one-on-one conversations. These programs are based on the integration of various well-being modalities, including yoga, Ayurveda, nutrition, coaching, and counseling.

Foundation For Mother And Child Health

This grassroots organization ensures that women and children in Mumbai's underprivileged communities receive essential healthcare and nutrition interventions. Their programs in impoverished areas promote balanced diets, preventive health measures, and child development techniques. To engage, educate, and empower women and children within their social environments, they have adopted a comprehensive strategy. The FMCH Training Center in Mumbai was established to develop a cadre of experts across Maharashtra and eventually throughout the entire country. Through nutrition-specific initiatives such as the Urban Nutrition Initiative and Project Poshan, FMCH works closely with families and large groups to encourage healthy eating, hygiene, and lifestyle choices. Each year, their programs impact more than 930 expectant and nursing women.

Cankids Kidscan

CanKids, the only national NGO in India dedicated to providing care for children with all forms of cancer, was established in 2004 under the auspices of the Indian Cancer Society. CanKids offers comprehensive support to children with cancer from detection and diagnosis through treatment and beyond, primarily through their signature program, YANA (You Are Not Alone). The organization collaborates with 113 cancer treatment facilities across 62 Indian cities and 27 states. Additionally, CanKids operates two CanShalas, ten Home Away from Homes (HAH), and a Palliative Care Center, the first of its kind in India.

Swasthya Swaraj

Focusing on healthcare and education, this foundation aims to help underprivileged and impoverished communities achieve excellent health. In tribal areas such as the Thuamul Rampur Block of Kalahandi district in Odisha, where families live in poverty and children suffer from severe malnutrition, the foundation has established model community health programs. The indigenous people residing here are all too familiar with poverty, illness, and fatalities—many of which go unreported and are preventable. The Comprehensive Community Health Program of Swasthya Swaraj operates in 76 villages, employing a unique community empowerment strategy to reach a broader audience. Its overarching goal is to create a fair and just society free from the constraints of poverty, illiteracy, and poor health.

Doctor For Seva Arogya Foundation

Arogya Seva is a global humanitarian volunteer organization that utilizes microvolunteering to provide high-quality healthcare services to various segments of society. The NGO offers patients in underserved communities access to healthcare services from all sectors of the healthcare industry, including hospitals, private practitioners, pharmaceutical companies, and healthcare providers across all specialties. With its network of 25,000 volunteers, Arogya Seva has already impacted over 100,000 beneficiaries and aims to reach one million lives within the next two years.

Movement For Alternatives And Youth Awareness (MAYA)

MAYA is a Karnataka-based non-profit organization founded in 1991 with the goal of establishing an egalitarian society by systematically addressing issues related to health, education, and livelihood. Through its health program, MAYA has developed a healthcare delivery system focused on preventive and promotive health. Health professionals are trained and equipped with the necessary technology to screen, monitor, and provide affordable, in-home healthcare to disadvantaged populations for conditions such as anemia, high blood pressure, and diabetes. Currently, more than 100 health professionals work across three districts, serving a population of approximately three million people.

SEARCH (Society For Education, Action And Research In Community Health)

This 34-year-old works in the impoverished, semi-tribal, and vulnerable region of Gadchiroli, located in the easternmost part of Maharashtra. The goal is and communities to take control of their own health, helping them become independent and free from illness. SEARCH has made groundbreaking contributions in the fields of women's health, tribal health,

maternal and neonatal health, reduction of alcohol and tobacco use, and non-communicable diseases. These programs have received numerous international honors, including the WHO Public Health Champion award, recognition as TIME Global Health Heroes, the MacArthur Foundation Award for Most Effective Institutions, and the National Award for Women's Development.

Arogya Mandal

Charulata Dandal offers comprehensive healthcare to rural populations in the Anand and Kheda districts of Gujarat at an affordable rate. Originally a 136-bed general hospital, the facility has expanded to include a medical college approved by the Medical Council of India, a 720-bed hospital, a postgraduate study institute, a nursing school, a physiotherapy college, a medical technology institute, and specialized cardiac care and cancer centers.

Conclusion

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a vital and transformative role in improving public health in India. Given that India continues to have some of the lowest public health expenditures globally, NGOs have stepped in to address critical gaps in accessibility, affordability, and quality of care. Their programs demonstrate remarkable innovation and adaptability, covering areas such as maternal health, disaster relief, cancer support, preventive healthcare, and tribal health empowerment. The case studies—including Doctors for You, Rural Health Care Foundation, Swasth Foundation, CanKids, Swasthya Swaraj, SEARCH, and others—highlight how NGOs have gone beyond service delivery to empower communities, advocate for systemic change, and develop sustainable healthcare models.

NGOs play a crucial role in addressing healthcare disparities across rural, urban, and tribal communities by reducing out-of-pocket expenses, raising awareness, and tailoring solutions to meet local needs. Their people-centered approach and grassroots engagement enable them to reach communities often overlooked by mainstream systems. However, establishing stronger connections with local communities, private stakeholders, and government agencies is essential for NGOs to achieve long-term success.

In summary, NGOs have become essential to the functioning of the public health system, rather than merely serving as supplements. By strengthening these collaborations and ensuring greater policy support, India can establish an inclusive, equitable, and resilient healthcare system that leaves no community behind.

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