



## Collaboration in service delivery: relations between governments and NGOs in South Asia

- A significant proportion of basic services, including for the poor, are not provided by government.
- NGOs often collaborate with government with the aim of strengthening public services.
- In spite of fears that such relationships may subordinate NGOs, they give NGOs opportunities to influence government policy and practice.
- NGOs are often seen as providers or advocates, but this research finds that the two may exist simultaneously.



### “Collaboration or confrontation?”

The post-independence ideal of universal state provision of basic services has not been realized. Surveys show that, in Bangladesh, 88% of households seeking health care go to non-state providers – mainly traditional village doctors. In Pakistan, more than one-third of primary school enrolment is in private schools; and the proportion is higher in urban areas. Outside the core of the larger cities of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the population largely depends on sanitation services organized by households, communities and entrepreneurs. Most private sector (commercial) providers operate independently from government, making up for gaps and deficiencies in public services. In some cases, NGOs or voluntary associations have adopted the same go-it-alone strategy, often supported by donors: Bangladesh is well known as a country where parallel systems of service delivery developed in the 1980s and 90s. However, many NGOs work in collaboration with government, either to improve public services or to complement them. The case for this sort of ‘partnership’ is now widely promoted by donors and acknowledged, in principle, by governments and many NGOs. While collaboration is now a widely diffused

model it is still by no means wholly legitimated. Purists of NGO autonomy would prefer them to maintain a wholly independent stance, advocating policy change and exerting external pressure on government. Politicians and public officials may see threats to their nominal mastery of public policy in the involvement of NGOs in the delivery of public services. How are these relationships handled in practice, and what are their effects on the autonomy of non-governmental public action?

#### **Are governments in charge?**

In India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, government policies for health, education, water and sanitation generally include some commitment to collaboration with non-government organizations.

The research examined examples of collaboration that run across the three countries. Primary health care centres have been contracted out to be managed by NGOs in all large cities of Bangladesh, in a few states of India, and on a pilot basis in Pakistan’s Punjab Province. In community sanitation, NGOs participate in programmes at a national level in Bangladesh, and in specific cities of India and Pakistan. In basic education, NGOs support ‘hard to reach’ children by providing access to complementary provision or improving the quality of government schools. None of these were seen by government or NGOs as permanent arrangements but as ways of filling gaps in government provision or bringing new and improved practices into government services.

### NGPA Programme

The Economic and Social Research Council Non-Governmental Public Action research programme is a unique opportunity to further understand the impact of non-governmental public action in reducing poverty and exclusion, and in social transformation, from an international comparative and multi-disciplinary perspective.

Public action by and for disadvantaged people, undertaken by non-governmental organisations and others, is increasingly significant at local and international levels. The focus of the programme is not just on NGOs, but on a broader range of formal and informal non-governmental actors concerned with poverty reduction and social transformation. These might include advocacy networks, campaigns and coalitions, trades unions, peace groups, social forums, rights-based groups, social movements and business in the community initiatives.

Building systematically on research to date, this programme will develop theory, generate new empirical theory, and foster beneficial linkages between researchers and users.