

Economic Role Of NGOs In Regional Development: Evidence From Manipur

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Abstract

In India's Northeast, there are these ongoing regional disparities that make development tricky, and that's where non-governmental organizations, or NGOs, come in to help with socio-economic issues. This paper examines their economic contributions in Manipur, particularly in education, healthcare, and the empowerment of women. Those sectors matter a lot for building human capital and getting inclusive growth going, since state efforts often fall short in places like that. The study uses a case study method to check out NGO interventions and their impact on marginalized communities, both in cities and rural areas in Manipur. It seems NGOs have done some good by improving access to basic services, expanding livelihood options, and increasing women's participation in economic activities. That stands out as a positive shift. But there are challenges too, like insufficient funding, governance issues, trouble reaching grassroots levels, and even political interference that messes things up. These issues limit NGOs' overall effectiveness. The research points out these hurdles, which affect conditions in urban and rural areas alike, though its hard to say how deep they go without more details. From an economic perspective, the paper argues that NGOs act as complementary development agents by filling institutional and service delivery gaps. The findings suggest that stronger coordination between the government and NGOs can improve development outcomes and reduce regional disparities. The study concludes with policy-level recommendations to enhance transparency, strengthen NGO-government partnerships, and improve the efficiency of NGO-led development initiatives in Manipur.

Keywords: *NGOs, Regional Development, Economic Development, Manipur, Inclusive Growth*

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I. Introduction

India's development has not progressed uniformly across all regions. While some states have experienced rapid industrial growth, improved infrastructure, and increased employment opportunities, others continue to struggle with economic limitations. The northeastern region of India is one such area where development has historically remained slower than the national average. Several factors contribute to this situation, including geographical remoteness, cultural and ethnic diversity, limited infrastructure, and complex political dynamics that have shaped the region over time (Baruah, 2007). Within this region, Manipur stands out as a distinctive case due to its challenging terrain, relatively small industrial sector, and ongoing socio-political issues. Manipur shares an international border with Myanmar, giving it strategic importance in India's northeastern frontier. A large portion of the state, nearly ninety percent, is covered by hilly terrain, while most of the population is concentrated in the valley areas. The state's economic development has been constrained by weak transportation networks, high logistical costs, and limited industrial investment, all of which hinder economic diversification. Consequently, agriculture continues to dominate Manipur's economy, though productivity levels remain relatively low. At the same time, rising youth unemployment and increasing migration of young people in search of better opportunities outside the state present continuing socio-economic challenges (Government of Manipur, 2022). Despite numerous government development programmes, gaps in implementation and institutional limitations often reduce their effectiveness. In response, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have become important actors in the development process. Working closely with marginalised communities at the grassroots level, NGOs are often better positioned to understand local needs. Their flexibility and community engagement enable them to address gaps in service delivery and livelihood support, thereby contributing to inclusive development outcomes (Lewis et al., 2020).

II. Literature Review

The question of the role that NGOs play in development has generated much debate among scholars in the fields of development studies, political economy and public administration. Previous state-focused development paradigms in the post-independent period had concentrated on centralised planning and industrialisation. Yet by the late 1970s and 1980s, critics had emerged within scholarship that challenged the capacity of governments alone to tackle poverty, inequality, and regional disparities (**Chambers, 1994**). This shift in thinking made room for civil society groups to be recognised as important actors in development processes.

Korten (1990) explains that NGOs have evolved through three stages of development. The first stage focused on relief and welfare activities. The second emphasised community development and capacity building. The third stage moved towards promoting sustainable change and influencing policy. This progression highlights that development involves not only economic growth but also empowerment and institutional transformation.

Edwards and Hulme (1995) suggest that NGOs are often viewed as more flexible, innovative, and community-oriented than government bureaucracies. Their close connection with local communities allows them to respond quickly to grassroots needs. However, they also highlight concerns such as weak accountability, reliance on donor funding, and possible shifts in organisational priorities due to external influence.

Chambers (1994) strongly advocates for participatory development approaches, emphasising that poor communities should be placed at the centre of decision-making processes. According to Chambers, outsiders often misunderstand local realities, whereas participatory methods allow communities to define their own needs. NGOs frequently adopt participatory tools such as community meetings, self-help groups, and grassroots planning processes. Such methods enhance ownership and sustainability of development programs.

The concept of human development strengthens the theoretical basis for NGO engagement in development processes. The United Nations Development Programme defines development as the expansion of people's capabilities, opportunities, and freedoms rather than only increases in income (**UNDP, 2015**). Access to education, healthcare, and sustainable livelihoods enables individuals to improve their quality of life. In this context, NGOs play a crucial role by improving access to essential services in marginalised regions. Partnerships between governments and civil society organisations are therefore considered vital for achieving inclusive and sustainable development outcomes.

Another important theoretical perspective is social capital theory. Putnam (1994) argues that networks, trust, and norms of cooperation contribute significantly to development outcomes. NGOs often help build social capital by organising community groups, encouraging collective action, and strengthening local institutions. In rural areas, this social cohesion can improve cooperation in livelihood activities and enhance resilience against economic shocks.

From an economic perspective, human capital theory highlights the importance of education and health in increasing productivity and long-term economic growth (**Becker, 1964**). NGOs that work in literacy programs, vocational training, and community healthcare directly contribute to strengthening human capital. In regions with limited public infrastructure, NGO interventions become particularly significant. In the Indian context, the growth of NGOs accelerated after economic liberalisation in the 1990s. As the state restructured its role, civil society organisations increasingly participated in service delivery and poverty alleviation programs (**Desai, 2005**). NGOs have been instrumental in promoting microfinance, women's self-help groups, and livelihood diversification initiatives across rural India. Studies show that women's participation in self-help groups enhances income stability, social empowerment, and decision-making capacity (**Desai, 2005; Sen, 1999**).

The World Bank (1996) recognises participation as a key element of effective development policy. Collaborative governance models emphasise partnerships between governments, NGOs, and local communities. Such partnerships improve policy responsiveness and accountability. Lewis et al. (2020) further argued that NGOs often function as intermediaries, linking marginalised populations to state resources and market opportunities. In conflict-prone or geographically isolated regions, NGOs may play an even more critical role. Northeastern India, including Manipur, presents unique socio-political and geographical challenges. Baruah (2007) highlights the region's historical marginalisation and complex ethnic dynamics. In such settings, NGOs often operate not only as development agencies but also as mediators promoting dialogue and trust-building. At the same time, literature also highlights certain limitations of NGOs. Funding dependency may restrict autonomy and long-term sustainability (**Edwards & Hulme, 1995**). Professionalisation may create distance between NGOs and communities. Additionally, weak monitoring mechanisms can affect transparency and credibility. Therefore, scholars argue for balanced partnerships and institutional strengthening to maximise NGO contributions.

Overall, the literature suggests that NGOs contribute to regional development through multiple pathways: expanding human capabilities, strengthening social capital, promoting participatory governance, and enhancing service delivery. Their role becomes particularly significant in regions where state capacity is limited or uneven. However, their effectiveness depends on supportive policy environments, financial sustainability, and institutional accountability. This theoretical and empirical background provides the foundation for examining the economic role of NGOs in Manipur. By situating the study within broader development debates, it becomes possible to understand NGO contributions not merely as isolated interventions but as part of a larger framework of inclusive and participatory regional development.

Table 2.1. Summary of Literature Review

Theory / Perspective	Key Scholar(s)	Core Idea	Relevance to present study
Human Capital Theory	Becker (1964)	Education and healthcare improve productivity and economic growth.	Explains how NGOs work in education and health strengthens regional economic capacity.
Capability Approach	Sen (1999)	Development is expansion of freedoms and capabilities.	Shows how NGOs enhance opportunities and empowerment in Manipur.
Participatory Development	Chambers (1994)	Development should involve community participation and local ownership.	Supports NGO grassroots engagement and community-centred interventions.
Social Capital Theory	Putnam (1994)	Trust, networks, and cooperation improve development outcomes.	Explains how NGOs build social cohesion and collective action.
NGO Governance & Institutional Role	(Lewis et al., 2020); Edwards & Hulme (1995)	NGOs act as intermediaries in development but face accountability challenges.	Frames NGOs as catalysts of regional development in Manipur.

III. Research Objectives And Questions

This study aims to examine the economic role of NGOs in Manipur, analyse sector-wise contributions, assess the impact of NGO interventions on marginalised communities, and identify operational challenges limiting NGO effectiveness. The study addresses four research questions: (i) *How NGOs contribute to regional development?* (ii) *Which sectors benefit most from NGO intervention ?* (iii) *Who the primary beneficiaries are ?* and (iv) *What challenges restrict NGO functioning ?*

IV. Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the economic role of NGOs in Manipur. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on understanding processes, experiences, and institutional roles rather than measuring numerical outcomes. Qualitative research enables the exploration of meanings and patterns within social contexts (Creswell, 2017). Since NGO activities often involve community participation, empowerment, and social change, this approach provides deeper insights into how such interventions contribute to regional development and improve the socio-economic conditions of local communities.

Case Study Approach

This study employs a case study approach to explore the role of NGOs in Manipur. A case study allows researchers to examine a specific unit in depth within its real-life setting (Hollweck, 2016). In this research, Manipur is treated as a single case because of its distinctive geographical conditions, socio-economic challenges, and active civil society involvement. Focusing on this context enables a detailed understanding of how NGOs contribute to development. The approach is particularly useful when the phenomenon being studied is closely linked to its surrounding context.

Sources of Data

This research relies entirely on secondary data. Secondary data refers to information that has already been collected and published by other researchers, government institutions, NGOs, and international organisations. The main sources of data for this study include: the Economic Survey of Manipur, state government reports, annual reports of NGOs operating in Manipur, journal articles, books, and development reports published by organisations such as UNDP and the World Bank. These sources provide information about socio-economic indicators, development challenges, and the scope of NGO interventions.

Data Collection Process

Data collection involved systematic identification and review of relevant documents. Government reports were examined to understand employment trends, poverty levels, infrastructure gaps, and regional development indicators. NGO reports were reviewed to identify intervention areas such as education, healthcare, livelihood promotion, and women's empowerment. Academic literature was analysed to establish theoretical and conceptual foundations.

The documents were selected based on relevance, credibility, and publication authenticity. Preference was given to officially published reports and peer-reviewed academic work to maintain academic reliability.

Method of Data Analysis

The study uses content analysis and thematic analysis to interpret the collected data. Content analysis involves carefully reading and categorising information from documents to identify recurring ideas and institutional patterns (Creswell, 2017). Thematic analysis involves grouping similar concepts into broader themes that reflect the structure of NGO interventions.

During analysis, information was organised into major themes such as education, healthcare, skill development, women's empowerment, and rural livelihood support. These themes were then connected to broader development concepts such as human capital formation (Becker, 1964) and capability expansion (Sen, 1999).

Analytical framework

The study is guided by selected development theories to interpret findings. Human capital theory explains how education and health interventions improve productivity and economic growth (Becker, 1964). The capability approach emphasises freedom, empowerment, and inclusion as central to development (Sen, 1999). Participatory development theory highlights community involvement as a key factor in sustainable development (Chambers, 1994). These theoretical perspectives provide a structured lens for analysing NGO contributions.

Rationale for Choosing a Qualitative Approach

A qualitative approach is particularly suitable in this context because many NGO contributions involve social processes such as empowerment, participation, and community mobilisation, which cannot be fully understood through numerical data alone. As Creswell (2017) explains, qualitative research helps explore meanings, institutional roles, and social experiences in depth.

Limitations of the Study

Although the study provides valuable insights, it also has certain limitations. Since it relies on secondary data, it does not include direct interviews with NGO workers or beneficiaries. Primary data collection such as, field surveys or interviews could have provided more detailed personal experiences. However, the use of multiple credible sources ensures that the findings remain reliable and academically sound.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were also observed in the research process. All information was taken from publicly available sources and properly cited. No confidential data was used. Academic honesty was maintained by acknowledging all referenced works through in-text citations and a reference list.

Overall, the qualitative case study approach allowed for a detailed and context-sensitive examination of the economic role of NGOs in Manipur. By combining document review, thematic analysis, and theoretical interpretation, the methodology ensures both depth and analytical clarity. This approach is suitable for understanding complex development processes where institutional roles, community participation, and regional characteristics are closely interconnected.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study positions NGOs as catalysts of regional development. NGOs influence inclusive growth by expanding livelihood opportunities, improving human capital, and strengthening service delivery systems (Lewis et al., 2020). Human capital formation through education and healthcare improves productivity (Becker, 1964). Livelihood promotion reduces poverty and enhances economic resilience. Service delivery ensures access to essential resources, particularly for marginalised groups. Together, these components contribute to balanced regional development.

Table - 1. NGOs as Catalyst

Core Actor	Mechanisms (NGO Influence)	Immediate Outcomes	Final Outcomes
NGOs as Catalysts	Expansion of Livelihood Opportunities	Poverty Reduction & Economic Resilience	Balanced Regional Development
NGOs as Catalysts	Human Capital Formation (Education & Healthcare)	Increased Productivity	Balanced Regional Development
NGOs as Catalysts	Strengthened Service Delivery Systems	Improved Access to Essential Resources (Especially for Marginalised Groups)	Balanced Regional Development

Socio-Economic Profile of Manipur

Manipur's socio-economic structure reflects its geographical characteristics. The hilly terrain limits connectivity and increases the cost of infrastructure development. While the valley region has relatively better facilities, the hill districts often face shortages in transport, healthcare services, and educational infrastructure. Agriculture remains the backbone of the state's economy, but productivity is constrained by limited irrigation, fragmented land holdings, and traditional farming methods. Industrial development in the state is minimal. The absence of large-scale industries reduces employment opportunities for educated youth. As a result, unemployment and underemployment remain serious concerns. Migration to other states has become a coping strategy for many households. These structural challenges create development gaps that NGOs attempt to address through targeted interventions.

Areas of NGO Intervention

Education

In the field of education, NGOs in Manipur support enrolment drives, provide supplementary education, and assist children from marginalised communities. By promoting access to schooling and reducing dropout rates, they contribute to human capital formation. Becker (1964) argues that investment in education increases productivity and long-term income potential, which directly links educational support to economic development.

Healthcare

NGOs support healthcare through awareness programmes, medical camps, and maternal care services in remote areas. Improved health outcomes enhance labour productivity and reduce economic vulnerability, thereby strengthening local health systems (**World Health Organisation, 2010**).

Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is another critical area of intervention. NGOs facilitate the formation of Self-Help Groups, promote savings and microcredit activities, and encourage entrepreneurship among women. Sen (1999) notes that empowering women enhances overall social welfare and economic stability. In Manipur, where women actively participate in local markets, such support strengthens household incomes and community resilience.

Skill Development and Rural Livelihood Promotion

Skill development initiatives target unemployed youth by providing vocational training in handicrafts, tailoring, computer literacy, and small business management. These programs improve employability and encourage self-employment. Livelihood promotion programs support sustainable agriculture, livestock rearing, and local enterprise development, thereby increasing income opportunities in rural areas.

Development Impact

The developmental impact of NGOs in Manipur can be understood through their contribution to human development, livelihood improvement, and social inclusion. Although NGOs operate on a smaller scale compared to government programs, their grassroots presence allows them to reach marginalised communities effectively. Their work supports long-term economic stability rather than only short-term relief.

Human Capital Development

NGOs contribute significantly to education and healthcare. Through literacy programs, school support, and skill training, they improve the knowledge and abilities of individuals. Human capital theory explains that education and health increase productivity and long-term economic growth (**Becker, 1964**). Health awareness campaigns and community-based services also improve workforce participation. These efforts help strengthen the economic base of the region.

Livelihood and Income Support

Many NGOs promote self-employment, vocational training, and small enterprise development. These initiatives provide alternative income sources in a state where industrial opportunities are limited. By supporting agriculture, handicrafts, and micro-enterprises, NGOs reduce economic vulnerability. Such livelihood diversification supports inclusive growth, especially for rural households (UNDP, 2015).

Women's Empowerment

Women's Self-Help Groups and microfinance programs have improved women's economic participation in Manipur. When women gain access to credit and training, household income and decision-making power improve. According to Sen (1999), empowerment enhances freedom and development outcomes. Women's economic participation also contributes to long-term social and economic stability.

Social Inclusion and Community Participation

NGOs strengthen community networks and encourage participation in development activities. Participatory development approaches increase ownership and sustainability (Chambers, 1994). In a socially diverse region like Manipur, NGOs also help build trust and cooperation among communities (Baruah, 2007). This social cohesion supports both economic and regional stability. Overall, the developmental impact of NGOs in Manipur goes beyond service delivery. Their work strengthens human capacity, promotes inclusive growth, and supports balanced regional development.

Economic Impact of NGOs

NGOs in Manipur contribute to the economy in both direct and indirect ways. They create employment through project activities and skill training while also strengthening human capital and reducing poverty. By improving access to education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities, NGOs support long-term productivity. Their initiatives help diversify income sources beyond subsistence agriculture and promote social inclusion by engaging tribal and marginalised communities, thereby encouraging more balanced and sustainable regional development.

Challenges Faced by NGOs

Despite their important contributions, NGOs in Manipur face significant challenges. Funding instability remains a major issue, as many organisations depend on short-term project grants. Regulatory requirements and administrative procedures sometimes delay implementation. The difficult terrain increases operational costs, especially in remote districts. Political instability and occasional conflict situations also affect fieldwork and community engagement. Additionally, smaller NGOs may lack professional staff and institutional capacity, limiting their ability to scale up successful initiatives.

Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that NGOs play a significant role in promoting regional development in Manipur. However, their effectiveness can be strengthened through supportive institutional frameworks and better coordination mechanisms. Strengthening collaboration between the government and NGOs should be a primary policy priority. Development literature emphasises that partnerships between state institutions and civil society improve service delivery and enhance accountability (World Bank, 1996; Lewis et al., 2020). Rather than viewing NGOs merely as implementing agencies, policymakers should recognise them as development partners with valuable grassroots experience and contextual knowledge.

Financial sustainability remains one of the most pressing challenges faced by NGOs. Many organisations depend on short-term project-based grants, which restrict long-term planning and institutional stability. Edwards and Hulme (1995) argue that funding insecurity often undermines NGO autonomy and effectiveness. Therefore, transparent and stable funding mechanisms should be developed at the state level to ensure continuity of development programs. Multi-year funding partnerships would allow NGOs to focus on community impact rather than administrative survival.

Capacity building is another important area requiring policy attention. Although NGOs possess strong community relationships, they may lack advanced skills in financial management, impact assessment, and data documentation. Strengthening institutional capacity enhances credibility and sustainability (Korten, 1990). Training programs in project management, monitoring systems, and digital governance can improve overall effectiveness. Collaboration with universities and research institutions can further promote evidence-based development practice.

Monitoring and evaluation systems must also be strengthened to improve transparency and public trust. According to Creswell (2017), systematic evaluation improves program learning and policy refinement. Monitoring frameworks should focus not only on financial compliance but also on social outcomes and

community satisfaction. Participatory evaluation methods can enhance ownership and ensure that programs remain aligned with local needs (**Chambers, 1994**).

Infrastructure improvement is equally important in the context of Manipur. Poor connectivity increases operational costs and limits outreach in remote hill districts. Regional development scholars emphasise that infrastructure plays a foundational role in enabling inclusive growth (**UNDP, 2015**). Investment in transportation and digital connectivity would indirectly strengthen NGO service delivery and economic participation in remote communities.

Finally, development planning in Manipur must remain sensitive to its socio-political complexities. Inclusive policies that promote inter-community trust and social cohesion are necessary for long-term stability (**Baruah, 2007**). NGOs can act as mediators and facilitators of dialogue, thereby contributing not only to economic development but also to social harmony.

V. Conclusion

This study examined the economic role of NGOs in regional development with special reference to Manipur. The findings suggest that NGOs function as important actors in promoting inclusive growth and expanding human capabilities. In a geographically constrained and economically limited region like Manipur, NGOs help bridge gaps in service delivery and livelihood support. Their contributions align with the broader understanding of development as the expansion of freedoms and opportunities (**Sen, 1999**).

Through interventions in education and healthcare, NGOs contribute to human capital formation, which is a key driver of economic productivity (**Becker, 1964**). Skill development and livelihood programs enhance income security and reduce vulnerability among marginalised groups. Such interventions reflect participatory and community - centered development approaches emphasised in the literature (**Chambers, 1994; Korten, 1990**).

The study also highlights that NGOs promote social inclusion and community empowerment. By forming self-help groups, supporting women's economic participation, and engaging youth in productive activities, NGOs contribute to long-term socio-economic resilience. Lewis et al., (2020) argue that NGOs often serve as intermediaries between communities and state institutions, strengthening democratic participation and accountability. Despite these contributions, NGOs in Manipur face structural challenges including, funding instability, administrative barriers, and infrastructural limitations. As noted by Edwards and Hulme (1995), NGO effectiveness depends heavily on institutional support and enabling policy environments. Without strategic collaboration and stable financial backing, the sustainability of interventions may remain uncertain.

Balanced regional development requires multi-actor cooperation. Government institutions, civil society organisations, and local communities must work together to address structural inequalities and promote inclusive growth (**World Bank, 1996; UNDP, 2015**). In this context, NGOs are not substitutes for the state but complementary partners who bring flexibility, local knowledge, and community trust. In conclusion, NGOs in Manipur play a transformative economic role by strengthening human capital, supporting livelihoods, promoting inclusion, and enhancing participatory governance. Recognising their contribution and addressing their operational challenges is essential for achieving equitable and sustainable regional development in the northeastern region of India.

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