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Q18

Can Civil Society and Non-Governmental Organizations present an alternative model of public service delivery to benefit the common citizen. Discuss the challenges of this alternative model.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · GS II · 15 marks · Development Processes and NGOs

Development processes and the development industry - the role of NGOs, SHGs, various groups and associations, donors, charities, institutional and other stakeholders.

Core demand of the question

- Can Civil Society and NGOs present an alternative model of public service delivery to benefit the common citizen. Discuss the challenges of this alternative model
- Honour the official stem. Discuss possibility and challenges together
- Keep the explanation within a 15-mark length

Revision summary

NGOs already deliver specialised, last-mile and surge services the common citizen uses.

They cannot replace PDS-scale entitlements that need tax, law and uniformity.

- **Challenges:** donor accountability, FCRA chill, short projects, elite capture, poor coordination, and a split between voice and service.

The State must not dump its Article 38 duty onto charities.

A regulated partnership with beneficiary boards and honest FCRA administration is the workable alternative, not a shadow government.

Introduction

Civil society and NGOs already deliver schools, watersheds, hospice care, and legal aid that a thin State does not reach. They can be an alternative model for the common citizen in niches. They cannot be a shadow government: legitimacy, scale, money, and accountability all pull the model back toward partnership with the public system, not replacement of it.

Body

Where an alternative model works

- **Last-mile innovation:** SEWA's member services, MKSS-type social audits, and watershed NGOs have delivered income, information and water with a human face the block office often lacks.
- **Specialised care:** palliative, disability, and rare-disease NGOs supply what line departments treat as residual.
- **Disaster and epidemic surge:** civil volunteers and NGO logistics have filled gaps in kitchens, oxygen, and data when the State was slow.
- **Rights literacy:** NGO help-lines make RTI, labour and forest rights usable for a citizen who cannot hire a lawyer.

- In these bands, the common citizen does benefit from a non-departmental delivery model - flexible, local, and mission-driven.

Why it is not a full alternative to the State

- Public services at continental scale - PDS, immunisation, policing, roads - need tax finance, uniform entitlement, and coercive legal authority that a society cannot vote to an NGO.
- **Cream-skimming is a risk:** NGOs may serve the reachable village and leave the hostile hinterland to the State, which is not an alternative for the common citizen as a class.
- The constitutional Welfare State under **Articles 38 and 47** cannot outsource its duty; NGOs are agents or critics, not sovereigns.

Challenges of the alternative model

- **Accountability:** an NGO board is not the Assembly; donors can set the menu more than beneficiaries can. Scandal or faith-based conditions then hit the user who has no vote against the secretary.
- **FCRA and regulatory chill:** foreign-contribution rules, tax exemptions, and alleged anti-national tagging can starve legitimate delivery or, conversely, hide opaque money - both are challenges to a clean alternative.
- **Capacity and continuity:** project cycles, volunteer turnover, and founder-centric trusts collapse when the grant ends; a PHC is supposed to outlive a project.
- **Capture and parallel power:** local elites can run an 'NGO' as a contractor; the State may use NGOs to shed blame while keeping the budget.
- **Coordination:** multiple NGOs in one district duplicate nutrition kits and ignore sanitation, which wastes the citizen's time.
- **Rights versus service:** a delivery NGO may stay silent on police abuse to keep its permission; a protest NGO may not run a clinic. The alternative model splits voice and service.

A workable position

- **Treat civil society as a complementary model:** contracted, audited, and rights-compatible, with social audits both of the NGO and of the department.
- **Recommendation:** a light, independent charity regulator, mandatory beneficiary seats on boards for publicly funded projects, and no **FCRA** use as a partisan switch - so the common citizen gets the NGO's flexibility without losing the State's entitlement.

Flow diagram

Civil society NGOs -> Niche last-mile delivery
 State entitlement tax authority -> Universal public services
 Niche last-mile delivery -> Citizen benefit in gaps
 Accountability FCRA scale capture -> Civil society NGOs
 Niche last-mile delivery -> Partnership not replacement
 Universal public services -> Partnership not replacement

Conclusion

Civil society and NGOs can present an alternative model in niches of last-mile care, audit and surge, and the common citizen has already benefited. The challenges - accountability, FCRA politics, scale, capture, and short project life - mean they cannot replace the public system. The democratic model is a regulated partnership, not a romantic handover of the Welfare State.

Facts & figures

SEWA / social-audit collectives

Illustrations of civil delivery and accountability that complement, rather than erase, the State.

FCRA

Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act; the sharpest regulatory lever over NGO money and, at times, over dissent.

Articles 38 and 47

Welfare-State duties that remain the government's even when NGOs run a project.

Public-private / NGO contracting

The actual Indian pattern in health, education and livelihoods - partnership with audit, not dual sovereignty.

Project-cycle risk

Grant timelines that end a school or a clinic the citizen had begun to trust.

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