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Q8(b)

How do 'Civil Society Organizations' such as 'NGOs' and 'Self-Help Groups' contribute to grassroot level social changes? Discuss

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx

Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx - Historical materialism, mode of production, alienation, class struggle; Emile Durkheim - Division of labour, social fact, suicide, religion and society; Max Weber - Social action, ideal types, authority, bureaucracy, protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; Talcott Parsons - Social system, pattern variables; Robert K. Merton - Latent and manifest functions, conformity and deviance, reference groups; Mead - Self and identity.

Core demand of the question

- Locate NGOs and SHGs as civil society organisations
- **Show mechanisms of grassroots change:** credit, voice, service delivery, rights, gender
- **Give Indian illustrations:** SEWA, Kudumbashree, NABARD SHG-bank linkage, rights NGOs
- Critically note NGOisation, dependence, capture

Revision summary

NGOs and SHGs are civil society forms between family, market and state.

They contribute through services, rights mobilisation, thrift, credit and women's public voice.

SEWA, Kudumbashree and SHG-bank linkage are standard Indian illustrations.

Social capital and capabilities names for the gain.

NGOisation, donor dependence and microcredit capture are the critical limits.

Grassroots change holds when members remain political subjects, not only project targets.

Introduction

Civil society organisations sit between household, market and state. Non-governmental organisations and self-help groups are two familiar forms in development practice. They claim to work at the grassroots: the hamlet, the slum, the women's meeting under a tree. The sociological question is how they actually produce social change, and for whom.

Body

How they contribute

NGOs may deliver services the state undersupplies-health camps, legal aid, watershed works-or they may mobilise rights, as in campaigns for information, forest rights or disability. They translate local trouble into files, courts and media. Antonio Gramsci's civil society is a field of hegemony as well as resistance; Tocqueville's associations train citizens. SHGs, especially women's groups linked to banks after NABARD's programme, create small credit, thrift and a public female voice in villages where the panchayat was a male space. Kerala's Kudumbashree and SEWA's organising of informal women workers show that livelihood and

citizenship can move together. Sanitation, immunisation and school attendance campaigns often run through such groups. At their best they thicken social capital in Coleman's sense and expand capabilities in Sen's sense.

Grassroots change is not automatic

Critics of **NGOisation** argue that donor-funded organisations can depoliticise struggle, professionalise leaders, and substitute project cycles for movements. Sangeeta Kamat and others described this risk. SHGs can become instruments of microfinance extraction, or of party and caste capture, rather than sisterhood. Men may take the loan while women carry the liability. NGOs may bypass panchayats and weaken already thin local democracy, or they may train panchayat women. Scale is limited: a successful cluster does not equal agrarian reform. The state may outsource its duties and then blame civil society for gaps.

Contribution is therefore **conditional**. NGOs and SHGs change grassroots life when they organise voice and resources without replacing politics, and when the poor remain members rather than beneficiaries on a list. They fail when they become a parallel bureaucracy of projects. Indian illustrations should keep both the **SEWA** and Kudumbashree yield and the microcredit caution. Change is grassroots only if local people can refuse a project and still have a public voice.

Flow diagram

Civil society -> NGOs services and rights
 Civil society -> SHGs credit and voice
 NGOs services and rights -> Grassroots change
 SHGs credit and voice -> Grassroots change
 Grassroots change -> Livelihood gender citizenship
 Grassroots change -> NGOisation capture risk

Conclusion

NGOs and SHGs can shift credit, care, rights and women's public presence at the grassroots. They are not a substitute for a capable, accountable state or for redistribution. Civil society contributes to change when it organises people, not when it only delivers a scheme.

Facts & figures

SHG-bank linkage

NABARD-promoted model of women's groups pooling savings and accessing bank credit as a grassroots financial institution.

SEWA

Self Employed Women's Association: union-plus-cooperative organising of informal women workers.

NGOisation

The process by which movements become donor-dependent professional agencies, with a risk of depoliticisation.

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