Compared to the 1970s, when most development NGOs had a commitment to social change, the vast majority of organisations in Bangladesh today are concerned with the provision of microfinance services. It is clear that there has been a considerable homogenisation of the NGO sector in Bangladesh driven by ideological predispositions and technical requirements of official donor lending.

Authors Naila Kabeer, professorial fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, Simeen Mahmud lead researcher at the BRAC Development Institute in Dhaka and Jairo Guillermo Isaza Castro, coordinator of the Research Group on Labour Economics at the Universidad de La Salle in Bogotá, Colombia, research the members of six organisations that straddle the continuum between microfinance and social mobilisation within Bangladesh. Three categories of organisation are examined: ASA and Grameen Bank who represent the minimalist microfinance end of the continuum, BRAC and Proshika the intermediate position, combining microfinance with social development inputs while Samata and Nijera Kori (NK) represent the ‘pure’ social mobilisation. The research describe the history of each organisation, highlighting some of the their similarities in their approaches, such as the focus on group-based strategies and regular meetings, as well as the differences. The study carried out a survey of old and new members of these organisations and supplement it with interviews with NGO staff and group members.

The key research finding is that social mobilisation organisations perform far better than those concerned with microfinance in generating political awareness and action, participation in NGOs’ Strategies and the Challenge of Development and Democracy in Bangladesh

In recent years Bangladesh has achieved rising rates of growth and a slow but steady decline in poverty, it has made remarkable progress on the social front in terms of health and education. However, it has performed abysmally on the governance front and is recognised as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. This paper examines an emerging view that Bangladesh’s active development NGO sector has contributed to positive development achievements and asks why these organisations have not made an equivalent contribution to governance.
Social mobilisation organisations have helped to transform their members from the clients of the rich and powerful into citizens willing to engage with the structures of power and to stand up for the rights of the poor.