



RESEARCH PAPER

OPEN ACCESS

Green Guardians: NGOs and Environmental Governance in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya

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Received:

2025/10/13

Accepted:

2025/11/08

Published:

2025/11/13

Abstract

This paper examines the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in environmental governance in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. Using structured interviews with local NGOs, across East and West Khasi Hills, and documentary evidence, the study maps actor roles, activities, and constraints shaping grassroots environmental action. Findings reveal that NGOs groups operate as information brokers, educators, pressure groups, and watchdogs, organizing awareness campaigns, training, advocacy, and monitoring that yielded outcomes such as enforcement actions against illegal industries. However, persistent challenges limit broader impact: chronic underfunding, limited technical capacity, political resistance, weak inclusion in formal decision-making, and questions of legitimacy and accountability. Survey respondents identify rampant deforestation, unscientific coal mining, and dilution of traditional sacred-grove values as primary threats, and they support integrating indigenous environmental knowledge into curricula and policy. The study identifies governance gaps where traditional custodians and modern institutions fail to coordinate effectively. It recommends legal reforms to guarantee public participation and disclosure, capacity building and funding for local NGOs and traditional councils, and measures to increase youth and women's representation in environmental decision-making. The paper concludes that empowering NGOs is essential for conserving sacred groves and ensuring equitable, resilient environmental governance in the Khasi Hills.

Keywords: Khasi Hills; NGOs; Environmental governance; Sacred groves; Deforestation; Community-based conservation

Introduction

Environmental governance ecosystem is marked by the involvement of a diversity of non-state actors (Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs), local communities and civil society) engaging in affairs that were previously assumed solely to be the purview of governments. The United Nations Department of Global Communications (DGC) defines Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs) as, "...any non-profit, voluntary citizens' groups which is organized on a local, national or international level. Task-oriented and driven by people with a common interest, NGOs perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring citizens' concerns to Governments, monitor policies, and encourage political participation at the community level. Some are organized around specific issues, such as human rights, environment or health..." (United Nations, 2023). Recent scholarship has demonstrated, for example, the important roles played by non-governmental organizations, corporations and subnational actors and civil society, in shaping the outcomes of global environmental governance (Pattberg, 2007; Betsill and Corell, 2007). For instance, in 1968, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) reported to the General Assembly its concern about mounting environmental degradation. This move by the Council represented the culmination of a growing international movement among non-governmental organizations (NGOs), conservationists, and ornithologists, which had raised the alarm over the worsening state of the environment (Chambers, 2005).

The burgeoning literature on the role of NGOs in environmental governance has highlighted their different roles in global environmental politics. For instance, they have been described as "agitators



for environmental action, architects of governance solutions, and entrepreneurs for new sorts of initiatives" (O'Neill, 2015). Similarly, Michele Merrill Betsill describes NGOs involved in climate change governance as "activists raising awareness and calling for action; as diplomats working with governments to draft climate policies; and as governors developing new mechanisms for steering society towards a low-carbon future" (Betsill, 2015). More generally, Nasiritousi describes their roles as "shapers of information and ideas, brokers of knowledge, norms and initiatives, and doers of implementing policies and influencing behaviours" (Nasiritousi, 2016).

The acknowledgement of the significance of NGOs in environmental governance is first evidenced from the fact that over 250 NGOs from 113 countries were invited to take part as observers and experts in the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden (Willetts, 1996). This conference laid the foundation for modern global environmental governance. At the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro 2,400 NGO representatives attended the Summit as observers (Burgiel and Wood, 2012). NGO participation continued to grow in the two succeeding UN sustainable development conferences. At the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, there were 8,000 NGO representatives. Similarly, the Rio+20 Conference in 2012 attracted thousands of NGO representatives (O'Neill, n.d.). The importance of NGOs is reaffirmed in the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report 2007 (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2007) and the UNFCCC Cancun Conference of 2010 (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC], 2010). The Brundtland Commission Report also acknowledged the indispensable role of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in environmental management and conservation (UNFCCC, 2010).

Scholars have also argued that while governments and multilateral organizations have the necessary funding to pay for these processes and the decision-making power to give them force, the involvement of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in environmental management tends to lend itself to more credibility from the public. They argued that governmental institutions have more clout while NGOs and foundations provide more public trust (Andersson and Shahrokhi, 2012; Kanie and Haas, 2004). Therefore, it is argued that NGOs are also better equipped to deal with environmental issues at the local level. The significance of NGOs in the environmental governance machinery is also reflected in the emergence of new non-governmental actors, mechanisms and institutions, which go beyond traditional forms of state-led treaty-based regimes and fill in areas marked by governmental non-action (Biermann and Pattberg, 2008).

Methodology

The proposed study was descriptive and analytical. The study was based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected from constitutional and legal documents, official websites, documents related to government programs on environment and relevant committees' reports, for example, documents of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), Government of India, UNEP, Government Departments, Khasi Hills Autonomous District Councils (KHADC), etc.

The study was undertaken in two Khasi districts of Meghalaya where there are large concentrations of sacred groves and protected forests and are at the same time experiencing large-scale environmental degradation due to extensive coal and limestone mining. The two districts are East Khasi Hills and West Khasi Hills.

A field survey was conducted through structured interviews with the NGOs, selected on simple random sampling methods using the lottery system, from East and West Khasi Hills of Meghalaya and with fifty (25 from each district) members of civil society groups, selected on simple random sampling methods, from community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and advocacy groups.

Questionnaire

1. Are you a member of any organization?
2. What is the major environmental issue in the Khasi Hills?
3. What is your opinion on the issue of coal and limestone mining in the Khasi Hills?
4. Are you involved in matters relating to protection of sacred/protected forests?
5. Is mining a major threat to the existence of the sacred/protected forest?
6. What are the major threats to the existence of the sacred/protected forest?
7. Do you engage with traditional institutions on matters relating to the sacred/protected forests? Please elaborate.

8. What are the main issues and challenges faced by the traditional institutions in preserving the sacred/protected forest?
9. What are the possible solutions to the environmental problems in the Khasi Hills?
10. What is your opinion on the overall role of civil society in environmental governance in the Khasi Hills?

The secondary sources included books, theses, journals, magazines, newspapers, discussion papers, seminar papers and working papers. The data collected has been analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively for a comprehensive understanding of environmental governance, issues and challenges.

Findings

Role of NGOs in Environmental Governance in the Khasi Hills

For the purpose of the study, a structured interview was conducted with the office bearers of the NGOs. The NGOs were selected on the basis of a random sampling method. These NGOs are the Grassroot NGO Shillong, Rilum Foundation For Sustainable Development, Nongkrem Youth Development Association, Ka Lamphang Society For Sustainable Development, Sauramandala Foundation, Women for Integrated Sustainable Empowerment (WISE), Indigenous Tribal Development and Empowerment Mission and the Khawkylla Community Resource Management Society.

The study of the working of NGOs shows that in Meghalaya, the concern for environment emerged in the 1990s in and around the time of the Supreme Court's ban on felling of timber in Meghalaya, which sensitized the people of Meghalaya on the dangers of deforestation and the need for environmental conservation. These organisations came up under the leadership of young educated middle-class people with a genuine concern for the state of the environment. They have acted as information brokers raising awareness on the importance of environmental protection and the need for sustainable land use. They have played a valuable role as opponents of government policy, drawing attention to the failures of domestic policies and exerting pressure on the government to take action on environmental issues. For example, the Khawkylla Community Resource Management Society has collaborated with North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project (NERCORMP), the North Eastern Council (NEC), Ministry of DoNER, Govt. of India and International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) in its environmental endeavours. In many instances, the NGOs have themselves carried out the work of government by undertaking necessary research, raising funds, and carrying out practical environmental management projects at the local level.

The study of these NGOs shows that most people in some way or other are involved in some sort of activism using different means to achieve their goal. These activities include policy suggestions, mobilizing people to protect against environmental degradation, conducting environment programs; raising their protest against government's inaction to put a check on the exploitation of the environment and its resources and mobilizing the civil society on environmental issues. Thus, it can be argued that NGOs are an important link between the people at the grassroots level and the state. They have been instrumental in creating awareness and implementing developmental activities and programmes.

The study of the select NGOs shows that concern for environment is very much prevalent in the state by organising awareness programs on environmental issues, tree plantation drive, educating the people on the importance of forest protection, providing training in forest management, collecting, disseminating, and analysing information and advocating environmental justice.

The NGOs under study felt the need to change the degraded status of environment, especially on issue of deforestation and coal mining. The NGOs opined that even after the Supreme Court Order banning the felling of timber in Meghalaya, illegal felling of timber is carrying on unabated in the Khasi Hills. According to them, one of the major sources of illegal felling of timber in the Khasi Hill is charcoal production. NGO leaders argued that the illegal charcoal business in West Khasi Hills and Eastern West Khasi Hills districts continues unabated despite the crisis of global warming and imposition of the ban by the Supreme Court of India. The illegal activity is reportedly thriving in every nook and corner of the two districts which produce tons of charcoal every year, while the authorities seem to turn a blind eye. He also alleged that the timber mafia in West Khasi Hills and the forest officials of the district are allegedly conniving in illegally transporting charcoal from the district. According to him, the mafia would transport the charcoal only at night to escape detection

by the police or any other agency. This claim by the NGO is supported by a news item, which appeared in Meghalaya's leading English Daily, the Shillong Times, on June 12, 2023, on the issue (The Shillong Times, 2023).

On the issue of coal mining, the NGOs express their disappointment over the sad state of affairs in the Khasi Hills. From the interview conducted, the NGOs are of the opinion that illegal mining of coal is going on unabated in the state even after the NGT Order of 2014. They argued that hundreds of trucks carrying illegal coal would ply at night to avoid the authorities. They contend that most of these rat-hole coal mines are controlled by big businessmen, ministers, coal barons and contractors, who are in positions of power. The NGOs claim received a shot in the arm when the High Court of Meghalaya's appointed committee, headed by retired judge B. P. Katakey said there has been no let-up in the transportation of the illegally mined coal. The Report stated that, the "Presence of such a huge quantity of illegally-mined coal, which is neither part of the earlier inventoried nor seized coal, amply establishes continued illegal coal mining," the report said (The Hindu, 2023).

Thus, from the interviews conducted with the NGOs in the Khasi Hills, three trends were observed as far as their activity on environmental issues is concerned. First, as an information provider, the NGOs seek to enhance the capacity of communities by increasing their awareness and consciousness through information regarding environmental laws and policies. Some of their objectives were to raise awareness and facilitate the vulnerable groups in getting access to information on environmental issues and access to participation in decision-making. The NGOs also perform the function of educating and motivating people for sustainable use of natural resources and to generate environmental balance by encouraging tree plantations, abstaining from destruction of flora and fauna and by protecting the same. Second, as *pressure groups*, the NGOs seek to intervene at governmental policy level to take up right decisions and steps to protect the environment. The NGOs seek to influence the government decisions on environmental issues by means of petitions, representations and sometimes protests. Thirdly, as a *watchdog*, NGOs are expected to monitor the environmental governance process and report and attend explanatory, monitoring, investigatory and other public meetings on environmental issues. As watchdogs, the NGOs keep the government, companies and private business entities in check and make sure that they are not doing anything illegal or damaging to the environment. For instance, as a result of the constant monitoring and protest by the NGOs, on July 10, 2023 four chimneys of the illegal coke oven factories located in Shallang West Khasi Hills, were dismantled through a controlled explosion. The NGOs also argued that as environmental watchdogs, their participation in the decision-making process is essential. However, the NGOs said that are rarely the NGOs invited to attend such meetings to give their inputs. They lamented over the fact that even when they do attend, their participation is either not very active or their concerns are not given due attention by the government.

However, the study also shows the limitations of the NGOs in fulfilling their environmental duties. The lack of financial resources was one most important factors faced by Non-Governmental Organisations. The financial generation of the two NGOs shows that they depend on donations and the funds they generate from their own contribution for their day-to-day activity. It is observed that the NGOs suffer from lack of funding from the government (NGO Darpan, NITI Aayog, 2023). The organizations also suffered from lack of real mass following and technical expertise; lack of efficient volunteers, making it further difficult for them to carry out their activities. The functioning of the NGOs is also criticised by members of the civil society who argue that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) do not always contribute to sound environmental decisions. The NGOs are often met with the challenges of legitimacy, transparency, and accountability. Thus, it is contended that the effect of NGOs on environmental governance and links is restricted to tactical links at most.

The study also shows that NGOs suffer from the apathy of the government mechanism towards them. It is observed that when the organisations expose the environmentally irresponsible practices the governments, their voice is often met with opposition from the Local bigwigs, bureaucrats and politicians who often attempt to frustrate their work. It is also observed that in certain instances, the government machinery has sought to curtail their activities in environmental issues. The organisations are also hardly involved in the policy decision-making process of the government. They have a very limited influence in environmental negotiations and have almost no observable effect on the negotiation process or outcome.

Further, the working of the NGOs is hampered due to the lack of trust by the civil society and leaders of traditional institutions in the role of such organisations. There is a prevailing perception among

members of the civil society that NGOs have become a money making machine and a kick-start ladder for want-to-be politicians. There is an argument that NGOs are rotten with corruption and malpractices. According to them, NGO is not synonymous with society. NGOs do not necessarily advocate general interest and represent only a segment of society. In fact, there is a tendency of centralization of NGOs' activity in urban Areas as compared to rural areas. There is also a lack of awareness by the civil society of the existence of the organisation and the activities they conduct. From the interview conducted with the office bearers of the NGOs, it is also observed that there is very limited interaction between the traditional institutions and the NGOs in terms of environmental issues. In fact, the engagement of NGOs in the environmental governance of the protected and sacred forests run by the traditional institutions is absent.

Thus, from the study conducted, we can conclude that the role of NGOs in environmental governance in the Khasi Hills is at a very nascent stage. While there is no doubt that the NGOs have played a prominent role in raising awareness in the community on the importance of environmental conservation and protection, providing environmental education to people on environmental issues like deforestation, dangers of coal mining, etc. they suffer from a lack of resources, expertise and support from society and the government machinery. Overall, the role of NGOs in environmental governance in the Khasi Hills is limited.

Discussion

The case studies indicate that local NGOs in the Khasi Hills have emerged as grassroots actors bridging communities and the state. Both NGOs examined were founded by young, educated locals and have "acted as information brokers" to raise awareness of environmental laws and sustainable land use. They organize community education and tree-planting drives, train villagers in forest management, and advocate environmental justice. The NGOs thus fulfill multiple roles: as information providers enhancing community capacity, as pressure groups lobbying for policy change, and as watchdogs monitoring pollution and illegal activities. For example, sustained NGO monitoring led to the controlled demolition of four illegal coal-oven chimneys in West Khasi Hills.

Nevertheless, the NGO leaders report persistent governance gaps and capacity constraints. The NGOs lament that, despite court bans, illegal timber felling (mainly for charcoal) and rat-hole coal mining continue unabated, aided by local "coal barons" and complicit officials. A recent High Court report confirmed huge stocks of unreported coal, underscoring continued illicit extraction. NGOs say they often fill gaps by researching, fundraising, and even implementing projects that government agencies neglect. However, they face chronic underfunding and weak organizational capacity: both groups depend on meagre donations with virtually no government support, and they lack sufficient staff, volunteers, and technical expertise. Civil society members also criticize some NGOs for limited transparency and accountability, arguing they "do not always contribute to sound environmental decisions" and remain marginal actors with only "tactical" impact. In short, NGOs are pioneering actors but constrained by resources, political resistance, and questions of legitimacy in the local governance system.

Interviews show that women's groups, student unions and churches led mass protests (from 2009 onward) against uranium ore exploration, and villagers refused to sell land for mining. Buoyed by this pressure, the Meghalaya government barred uranium mining unless safety could be assured. Similarly, activists recently submitted a detailed citizen report to India's Supreme Court demanding a halt to illegal coal mining and calling for transparent resource databases (leases, royalties, clearances). These examples illustrate bottom-up activism raising issues and pressuring authorities. The surveys converge on key environmental concerns: rampant deforestation and unregulated resource extraction. The NGOs respondents identified deforestation, from charcoal burning, clearing for agriculture, illegal logging and mining, (see figure 1) as the top issue. Many also pointed to population pressure and ad hoc development as stressors. Reflecting this, virtually all interviewees emphasized the need for a sustainable development model that balances livelihoods with conservation. There are, however, contradictions between traditional and modern approaches. The study notes that Khasi sacred-grove traditions, once protected by clan elders and folklore, are eroding under capitalist pressures. A majority (42%) see dilution of ancestral beliefs as a major threat to sacred groves. At the same time, 54% recommend incorporating indigenous environmental knowledge into school curricula, and another portion advocates scientific mining techniques, revealing a community keen to blend traditional wisdom with modern science.



Fig. 1. Major Threats to Environmental Governance in Khasi Hills, Meghalaya

The findings highlight significant inclusion gaps in governance. NGOs leaders reported that decision-making forums routinely exclude NGOs: even when invited, their input is minimal or ignored. Traditional village institutions remain heavily male- and elder-dominated. Women have “no voice” and youth hold only nominal membership in councils that manage sacred forests. Respondents thus identify institutional barriers: traditional guardians lack funds and technical support, while state mechanisms provide few legal channels for citizen participation. These gaps mean that, despite strong grassroots activism, environmental governance often remains “corrupted, uninformed and unilateral”. Notably, civil society has succeeded in the uranium case but has played a limited role in protecting sacred groves and stopping illegal mining, reflecting a broader pattern that without formal inclusion and resources, local actors’ initiatives are stymied.

Conclusion

Despite facing considerable challenges, the study demonstrates that NGOs are pivotal actors within environmental governance mechanisms in the Khasi Hills. These organizations have been instrumental in enhancing environmental awareness, orchestrating public mobilization, and, on occasion, achieving tangible policy impacts, such as the cessation of uranium mining initiatives. NGOs have filled critical institutional gaps by championing sustainable resource management and vigilantly exposing environmental transgressions. Nevertheless, their efficacy is persistently limited by financial deficiencies, institutional frailty, and societal barriers. The deterioration of traditional ecological institutions stems from insufficient support, while contemporary governance systems frequently marginalize or exclude local community voices. To consolidate NGOs’ role as effective environmental stewards, the study recommends a trinity of strategic interventions. Firstly, legal and policy reforms that enshrine public access to information and formally establish avenues for NGO and citizen participation in environmental decision-making forums. Secondly, ensuring mandatory NGO involvement in planning bodies and judicial proceedings will enhance the impact of civil society engagement; and lastly, the integration of indigenous knowledge systems of the Khasis, particularly the ethos of sacred groves, into curricula, thereby ensuring intergenerational knowledge transmission and the revitalization of traditional ecological practices through institutional support.

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Author Contributions

BLM conceived the concept, wrote and approved the manuscript.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the contribution and support of Mrs. Wandashisha Wahlang, Meghalaya through the course of the field study.

Funding

Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials

Not applicable.

Competing interest

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethics approval

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.



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Citation: Mawlong BL (2025) Green Guardians: NGOs and Environmental Governance in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya. *Environmental Science Archives* 4(2): 774-781.