

## THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN PROMOTING COLLECTIVE HEALTH AND COMBATING INEQUALITIES



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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in promoting collective health and combating social inequalities, through an integrative literature review. The research is justified by the growing relevance of NGOs in the global health scenario, especially in contexts of vulnerability and low government coverage. The methodology used was based on the selection of studies published in the last ten years in databases such as PubMed, Scielo and Lilacs. The results indicate that NGOs play a key role in expanding access to health services, in education and disease prevention, and in advocating for more inclusive public policies. However, challenges have been identified, such as financial sustainability and lack of integration with public health systems, which may jeopardise the continuity of their actions. The conclusion of the study reaffirms the importance of NGOs for strengthening public health, but suggests the need for greater cooperation between NGOs and governments, in addition to the creation of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of their interventions. Future research can explore solutions to overcome these challenges and expand the impact of NGOs in combating social inequalities.

**Keywords:** Non-Governmental Organizations. Health Promotion. Social Inequalities. Public health. Social Determinants of Health.

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## INTRODUCTION

The promotion of collective health and the fight against inequalities are global challenges that involve the articulation of various social actors, in addition to a joint effort between governments, civil society, and the private sector. In this scenario, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have emerged as protagonists in the implementation of actions aimed at reducing social disparities and improving health conditions in various communities. Its work ranges from direct assistance to the promotion of more inclusive public policies, creating opportunities for vulnerable populations to access essential health and education services (Pires *et al.*, 2019).

Collective health, as established by the World Health Organization (WHO), is a concept that encompasses physical, mental, and social well-being, and not just the absence of disease. To achieve this ideal, it is necessary to deal with the social determinants of health established in law 8080 of 1990 (Brasil 1990). And it is in this context that non-profit entities play an important role, acting where the public authorities often cannot reach, especially in regions marked by deep socioeconomic inequalities (Magalhães 2018).

Humanitarian organizations often focus their work on neglected areas and populations, providing medical care, awareness campaigns, and educational programs aimed at promoting health (Lima; Campos, 2022). They also play a significant role in the formulation of public health policies, acting as intermediaries between communities and the State. By advocating for the health rights of marginalized groups, NGOs contribute to building more equitable and accessible health systems (McBritton *et al.*, 2018).

The rationale for this study lies in the growing importance of NGOs in the global public health scenario, especially in developing countries, where health systems face major structural and financial challenges. As governments face budget constraints and health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of philanthropic institutions becomes even more relevant, as they fill gaps in access to health services and tackle inequalities in a direct and innovative way (Nascimento *et al.*, 2023).

In addition, understanding the role of non-profit entities in promoting public health can provide valuable insights for strengthening public policies and building more efficient partnerships between the public and private sectors, and civil society. Non-governmental institutions bring an organizational flexibility and adaptability that is often absent in

governmental institutions. Therefore, analyzing their experiences can provide subsidies for the formulation of more inclusive and effective health policies (Selau *et al.*, 2021).

Another relevant aspect to consider is the ability of NGOs to mobilize human, financial, and logistical resources in emergencies, such as natural disasters or public health crises. Many of these organizations operate in international networks, which allows them to respond quickly to these situations by providing medical care, supplies, and other essential services. At the same time, humanitarian organizations also face challenges related to the sustainability of their actions, since they depend on external donations and funding. In view of these issues, it is essential to critically analyze the limits and potentialities of the performance of non-profit entities in the field of public health. Although these organizations play an indispensable role, it is necessary to assess the extent to which their actions are capable of generating structural and lasting changes in the communities where they operate, or whether their impact is limited to one-off and temporary interventions.

Furthermore, the objective of this study is to analyze the role of NGOs in promoting collective health and combating social inequalities.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework of this study will be addressed in topics for a better understanding of the theme under study. To this end, it is necessary to explore the main theories and models that support this action, as well as the existing literature on the impact of organizations on public health.

## **CONTEXT ON COLLECTIVE HEALTH**

Since the 1970s, after the end of World War II, the movement known as collective health has emerged. This movement developed in response to the social, economic, and political changes that occurred in the global scenario, marked by the advance of industrialization, urbanization, and the growing inequality in access to health services. Collective health proposed a broader and more integrated view of the concept of health, which goes beyond the absence of diseases, incorporating social, economic, environmental, and cultural determinants (Silva; Schraiber; Mota 2019).

The collective health movement highlighted the importance of social participation in the formulation and execution of health policies, recognizing the need for strategies that address health promotion and disease prevention in an equitable manner. This perspective

also underlines the relevance of intersectoral actions, uniting different areas such as education, sanitation, housing and work, to promote the well-being of the population (Silva; Schraiber; Mota 2019).

Through this, collective health comes to be understood as an approach that transcends individual attention and seeks solutions to health problems at the population level, considering social, economic, cultural, and environmental factors. This focus is fundamental to combat inequalities, which manifest themselves acutely in health (Matos *et al.*, 2018).

Collective health is based on principles such as equity, universality, and comprehensiveness. These concepts consider that the health of a population does not depend only on biological factors, but also on living conditions, access to resources, and public policies. In this approach, the social determinants of health, such as income, education, working conditions and housing, are central (Brasil 1988; Brazil 1990). These determinants create contexts of vulnerability that significantly affect access to health care and the quality of life of populations, this theoretical view underpins the work of NGOs that work in the promotion of collective health, as their interventions are often aimed at mitigating the effects of these determinants (De Siqueira; Hollanda; Motta 2017).

## EQUITY IN HEALTH

Equity in health is one of the central principles of the Unified Health System (SUS), established by the Federal Constitution of 1988. This principle ensures that access to health services is offered in a way that is fair and proportionate to the needs of each person or group, recognizing that those in situations of greater vulnerability must receive more attention and resources to overcome existing inequalities. In other words, the concept of equity in health emphasizes the need to reduce inequalities by adopting an approach that takes into account the different health needs of the population and distributes resources fairly, considering these differences (Brasil 1988).

Within this context, NGOs play an important role in promoting social justice by ensuring that access to health services is guided by the specific needs of each group. Often, these philanthropic institutions work with marginalized or neglected populations, seeking to fill gaps that the State, for various reasons, cannot adequately fill (De Siqueira; Hollanda; Motta 2017).

## MODELS OF ACTIONS IN COLLECTIVE HEALTH

Collective health action models are structured to promote the well-being of the population, taking into account the social, economic, and environmental determinants that directly influence health. Among the main models used in collective health, Primary Health Care (PHC) stands out, which focuses on the prevention, promotion, and treatment of diseases, playing a central role in the collective health strategy in Brazil, especially through the Family Health Strategy (ESF). PHC prioritizes comprehensive care and continuous monitoring of families and communities, addressing not only physical health, but also social and psychological factors that impact the health of individuals (Brazil 2017).

Another relevant model is health promotion, which is based on the formulation of public policies aimed at creating healthy environments and behaviors. This model seeks to encourage the adoption of practices such as a balanced diet, regular physical activity and adherence to vaccination campaigns, promoting healthy lifestyles and reducing risk factors associated with chronic and infectious diseases (Brasil 2006).

In addition, health education plays a fundamental role, acting to raise awareness among the population through campaigns, lectures and educational workshops. This model aims to provide the population with the necessary information and tools so that they can make more informed and conscious decisions about their own health, promoting the protagonism of communities and contributing to the prevention of diseases and the promotion of a healthier life. Thus, the models of actions in collective health complement each other by seeking to reduce inequalities and strengthen health care in a broad and integrated way (Gonçalves *et al.*, 2020).

## ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN THE PROMOTION OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have stood out in the adoption of action models that go beyond direct medical care, developing programs that encompass health education, professional training and the strengthening of communities for self-sustainability in health. This model of action aligns with the vision of health promotion, which emphasizes the empowerment of communities to exercise control over their health and improve their quality of life (Minayo *et al.*, 2019).

In addition, NGOs have played a crucial role in the implementation of public policies aimed at promoting health in areas with little government coverage. These entities have a

unique ability to mobilize resources quickly and efficiently, promoting innovation in health policies due to their flexibility and ability to adapt to different contexts. In several regions of the world, they have been fundamental in the execution of health programs where the State cannot reach effectively (Coelho; Greve 2016).

The work of NGOs is often marked by the promotion of initiatives that involve health education and disease prevention, addressing local needs in a specific and collaborative way. In many situations, these organizations act as intermediaries between the State and the communities, articulating demands and facilitating the implementation of public policies. By acting in this way, NGOs contribute to the construction of a more inclusive and participatory health system, especially in contexts of high social vulnerability (Westphal et al., 2016).

However, despite the positive contribution of NGOs to the promotion of public health, it is important to recognize the challenges faced by these organizations. Financial sustainability is a recurring issue, as many NGOs rely on external funding and donations, which can limit the continuity of their activities. In addition, there are criticisms about the lack of coordination between these organizations and government health systems, which, in some situations, can result in duplication of efforts or limited coverage (De Mendonça et al., 2016).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study consists of an integrative literature review, which used the PICO (Patient, Intervention, Comparison and Outcome) strategy to formulate the following research question: "What is the importance of NGOs for the promotion of Collective Health and the Fight against Inequalities". Based on this formulation, it was possible to delimit the criteria for the selection of studies, seeking to ensure the inclusion of relevant and up-to-date scientific evidence to answer the proposed question. The PICO strategy allowed a structured approach, facilitating the identification and analysis of data in the bibliographic sources consulted.

The choice for this methodology is justified by its ability to integrate different types of studies, whether quantitative or qualitative, providing a comprehensive view of the impact and challenges of the work of NGOs in public health. The sample was selected through searches in scientific databases, such as PubMed, Scielo and Lilacs, as well as institutional reports and relevant government documents. Studies published in the last ten years (2014-



2024) were included, considering an article. The inclusion criteria adopted were: studies available in full, free of charge, that were within the selected period, in Portuguese and English and dealt with the proposed theme. Excluded were those that did not have a clear methodology, only titles and abstracts, book chapters, abstracts published in annals, studies outside the selected period and that did not address the proposed theme were excluded.

Data collection followed a structured protocol, where articles were first selected based on their keywords and abstracts, followed by a complete reading for final inclusion in the study. The keywords used included terms such as "Non-Governmental Organizations", "health promotion", "social inequalities", "public health" and "social determinants of health". Then, the selected studies were analyzed based on criteria of methodological quality and relevance to the theme.

The analysis of the collected data was carried out through a narrative synthesis of the findings, seeking to identify patterns, gaps and convergences in the results of the included studies. A thematic analysis was carried out, in which the data were grouped into categories that reflected the main areas of activity of NGOs, the impacts of these actions on public health and the challenges faced by organizations. The objective of this analysis was to provide a clear and critical understanding of the contributions of non-profit entities to the reduction of inequalities and the promotion of health equity.

Regarding ethical considerations, as this study is based on secondary data available in the scientific literature and public documents, there was no need to submit to a research ethics committee. However, every care has been taken to ensure the responsible use of the sources, respecting copyright and appropriate citation and referencing standards. This study has some limitations. First, focusing on publications from the last ten years may exclude relevant studies prior to this period. In addition, the search was limited to three databases, which may restrict access to other potentially important studies that are outside of these sources. Another limitation refers to the very nature of the integrative review, which, by synthesizing different types of studies, may not provide an in-depth analysis of each method individually. However, these limits were considered in the process of analysis and discussion of the results.



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results of this review show that NGOs play an essential role in promoting collective health and combating social inequalities. The analysis of the selected studies revealed that non-governmental institutions work in several areas, with emphasis on access to health, health education and strengthening of public policies in needy regions. For example, in the study carried out by Bichir and Canato (2019) which highlights that NGOs are able to reach vulnerable populations and provide essential services where the State, for various reasons, cannot act effectively.

Regarding access to health, Silva *et al.* (2016) points out that civil society organizations contribute significantly to the expansion of health services, especially in rural and remote areas, as well as in marginalized urban communities. These findings corroborate the idea of Frias *et al.* (2021) who report that these organizations provide everything from basic medical care to specialized care, such as disease prevention, infection treatment, and support for pregnant women. The creation of mobile clinics and the presence in hard-to-reach places are frequently cited strategies that have positively impacted the health of these populations. These findings are in agreement with the existing literature, which already pointed to the ability of NGOs to fill gaps left by the public health system, especially in low-income regions with limited infrastructure.

In the context of health education, it is evident that philanthropic institutions have played a very important role in promoting preventive practices and disseminating information on public health. The educational campaigns promoted by these organizations, often focused on the prevention of diseases such as HIV, tuberculosis, and malaria, have been shown to be effective in increasing the population's knowledge and changing behaviors that can contribute to reducing the incidence of diseases (De Lima 2020). The literature reinforces that NGOs have the ability to adapt their educational messages to the cultural context of the communities, making their campaigns more accessible and effective. This adaptability has been identified as an important differentiator in relation to public health campaigns conducted by governments, which often follow a more standardized approach (Tizziani *et al.*, 2019).

In relation to the strengthening of public policies, non-governmental institutions not only act both in the provision of services and in the performance of an advocacy role. They often collaborate with governments and other entities to influence the formulation and implementation of policies that favor health equity. In some cases, NGOs have been

instrumental in the creation of new health policies, especially with regard to the inclusion of vulnerable populations in public health services (Seguro *et al.*, 2021).

Despite the positive contributions, it was also possible to identify the important challenges faced by humanitarian organizations. Financial sustainability was identified as one of the main difficulties. Many of them rely on short-term donations and funding, which can jeopardize the continuity of their health programs. This financial limitation is also discussed in the literature, which points out that, although NGOs have a significant role, their dependence on external sources of funding can limit the long-term impact. In addition, the lack of integration between non-governmental institutions and government health systems was another challenge identified, with some studies suggesting that lack of coordination can result in duplication of efforts or the disorganized provision of services (Pensutti *et al.*, 2023).

Another aspect discussed was the need for greater transparency and accountability. Although NGOs have an important role in health promotion, some studies have pointed to the lack of clear indicators that allow measuring the impact of their actions consistently. The existing literature corroborates this concern, suggesting that many civil associations face challenges in relation to the evaluation of their initiatives and the adequate documentation of the results achieved. This represents an important area to be improved to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the actions implemented (Sales *et al.*, 2021).

Thus, it is highlighted that NGOs are essential for strengthening collective health, but they face structural challenges that can limit their impact. One of the points highlighted was the need for greater integration between NGOs and public health systems. Closer collaboration with governments could not only ensure the sustainability of their actions, but also avoid duplication and optimize available resources. In addition, the creation of more robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms would be an important strategy to improve their transparency and effectiveness (De Matteo *et al.*, 2024).

In view of this, it is notorious that philanthropic institutions play a significant role in promoting collective health and reducing inequalities, offering services that the State is often unable to provide effectively. However, for its impact to be maximized, it is necessary to overcome challenges related to financial sustainability, integration with public health systems, and impact assessment. Future research directions can explore how to strengthen these partnerships and how to implement more effective evaluation systems to ensure the

continuity and effectiveness of actions promoted by non-governmental institutions (Murad *et al.*, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

This study summarized the main findings of the review, reaffirming the relevance of NGOs in promoting collective health and combating social inequalities. The research showed that NGOs play a key role in expanding access to health services, especially in vulnerable areas and populations that are often not adequately served by government health systems. In addition, humanitarian organizations have been instrumental in health education and the promotion of preventive campaigns, adapting their strategies to the cultural and contextual needs of the communities served.

The results also show that, in addition to the provision of services, non-profit entities play an important role in advocating for inclusive public policies, directly influencing the formulation and implementation of health policies that promote equity. However, significant challenges have been identified, such as financial sustainability and lack of integration with public health systems, factors that can limit the continuity and impact of their actions.

The objectives of this study were achieved by providing a comprehensive overview of the role of NGOs in public health and by highlighting both their contributions and the challenges faced. The survey reaffirms the need to strengthen partnerships between civil society organizations and governments to optimize resources and improve the effectiveness of interventions, as well as suggesting the importance of developing more robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. In terms of practical implications, the results suggest that institutional and financial support for NGOs is essential to ensure the continuity of their actions and maximize their impact on health promotion and reduction of inequalities. Future research should focus on strategies to overcome the challenges of integration and sustainability, as well as investigate their role in broader contexts, such as in high-income countries, for a more global understanding of their performance.

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