

Role of NGOs and Civil Society in Supporting IDPs in Kerala: Lessons from 2020–2025 Disasters

“The true measure of a society’s strength is not how it prevents disaster, but how it protects the most vulnerable when disaster strikes.”
— **Kofi Annan**

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Abstract

The state of Kerala has faced recurring natural disasters over the past decade, including floods, landslides, and cyclonic storms, leading to repeated internal displacement. Between 2020 and 2025, thousands of families were displaced due to extreme monsoon events and climate-related hazards. This project examines the role of Non-Governmental Organisation's (NGOs) and civil society in supporting Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Kerala during this period. It explores emergency response, camp management, livelihood restoration, psychosocial care, and long-term rehabilitation efforts. The study also evaluates coordination between NGOs and government agencies such as the Kerala State Disaster Management Authority (KSDMA). Using secondary data sources including government reports, NGO publications, and academic literature, the report identifies best practices, challenges, and lessons for strengthening disaster response systems. The findings highlight that civil society’s grassroots networks, volunteer mobilisation, and community trust significantly enhanced relief operations, though funding gaps and coordination challenges persist. The study concludes that sustainable displacement management requires integrated planning, climate adaptation strategies, and stronger state–civil society partnerships.

Keywords : Kerala, Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Natural Disasters

1.1 Introduction

Over the past decade, the Indian state of Kerala has experienced an increasing frequency and intensity of climate-related disasters, including severe floods, landslides, and cyclonic storms. Recurrent extreme monsoon events, particularly between 2020 and 2025, have led to large-scale internal displacement, disrupting livelihoods, damaging infrastructure, and placing significant pressure on local governance systems. Thousands of families have been forced to leave their homes, often multiple times, creating complex humanitarian and developmental challenges. As climate variability intensifies, the issue of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Kerala has become not only a disaster management concern but also a long-term socio-economic and environmental issue.

In this context, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and civil society actors have emerged as crucial stakeholders in disaster response and rehabilitation efforts. While state institutions such as the Kerala State Disaster Management Authority (KSDMA) coordinate official disaster management mechanisms, grassroots organisations, faith-based groups, community networks, and volunteer collectives have played a pivotal role in bridging operational gaps. Their interventions have ranged from emergency relief distribution and camp management to livelihood restoration, psychosocial support, and long-term rehabilitation initiatives.

This study examines the role and contributions of NGOs and civil society in supporting IDPs in Kerala during the period 2020–2025. It seeks to analyse how these actors complemented government initiatives, the extent of coordination between state agencies and non-state actors, and the effectiveness of their interventions in addressing both immediate humanitarian needs and long-term recovery. By drawing on secondary sources such as government reports, NGO publications, and academic literature, the study identifies key best practices, operational challenges, and lessons learned.

Understanding the dynamics of state–civil society collaboration in disaster contexts is essential for building resilient and inclusive response systems. As climate risks continue to escalate, sustainable displacement management in Kerala will require integrated planning, climate adaptation strategies, and stronger institutional partnerships. This research aims to contribute to that discourse by highlighting the experiences, achievements, and limitations of NGO engagement in disaster-induced internal displacement management.

1.1 Background of the Study

Kerala is geographically vulnerable to floods, landslides, and coastal erosion due to its high rainfall, dense river systems, and fragile Western Ghats ecosystem. Following the devastating 2018 Kerala floods, the state continued to experience severe flooding and landslides, including the 2021 Kerala floods. These disasters caused large-scale internal displacement, forcing families into relief camps and temporary shelters. Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are individuals forced to flee their homes due to disasters or conflict but remain within national borders. In Kerala, disaster-induced displacement has become increasingly cyclical, affecting vulnerable populations repeatedly.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite strong government intervention, recurring disasters strain institutional capacity. NGOs and civil society organizations play a crucial complementary role, yet their contributions and challenges between 2020 and 2025 require systematic study.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

- To examine the scale and causes of internal displacement in Kerala (2020–2025).
- To analyze the role of NGOs and civil society in emergency response and rehabilitation.
- To identify challenges faced by these organizations.
- To suggest policy recommendations for improved displacement management.

1.4 Methodology

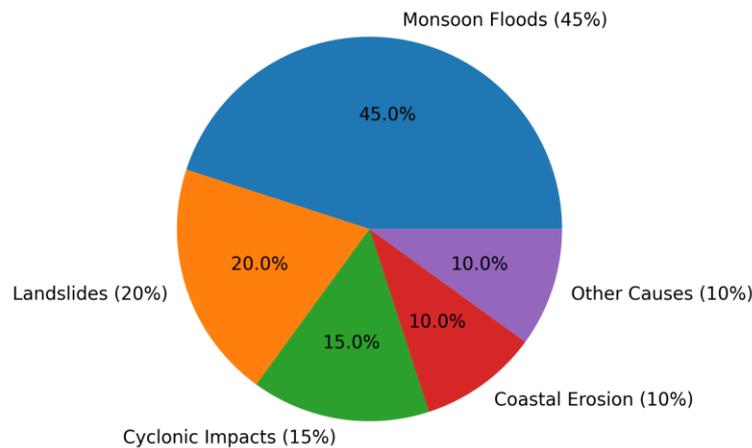
This study is based on a qualitative analysis of secondary data drawn from multiple credible sources. These include official government reports published by the Kerala State Disaster Management Authority (KSDMA), which provide detailed information on disaster response strategies, displacement figures, and rehabilitation policies. The research also relies on documentation and reports produced by various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in relief and recovery operations. In addition, peer-reviewed academic journals offer theoretical insights and empirical studies related to internal displacement, disaster management, and civil society engagement. Media reports have been consulted to capture real-time accounts of disaster events and on-ground responses, while relevant policy documents help contextualise the institutional and legal frameworks guiding disaster governance in Kerala. Together, these sources enable a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the role of NGOs and civil society in supporting internally displaced persons.

2.1 Internal Displacement in Kerala (2020–2025)

2.1 Causes of Displacement

The major causes of internal displacement in Kerala during the study period were primarily climate-related hazards. Monsoon floods accounted for approximately 45% of displacement incidents, as prolonged and intense rainfall led to river overflows, dam releases, and widespread inundation of low-lying areas. Landslides in high-range districts such as Idukki and Wayanad contributed to nearly 20% of displacement cases, particularly affecting vulnerable hillside communities. Cyclonic impacts from the Arabian Sea were responsible for around 15% of displacement, with strong winds and heavy rainfall damaging homes and infrastructure. Coastal erosion along Kerala's shoreline constituted an estimated 10% of displacement, gradually forcing families to relocate due to the loss of land and housing. The remaining 10% resulted from a combination of localized flooding and secondary disaster effects. Overall, increasing climate variability has intensified extreme rainfall patterns and associated hazards, significantly elevating displacement risks across the state. Climate variability has intensified extreme rainfall events, increasing displacement risk.

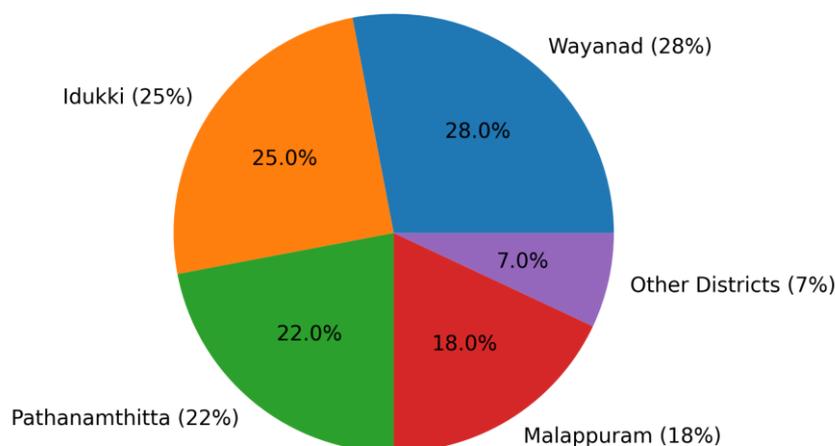
Major Causes of Internal Displacement in Kerala



2.2 Scale and Geographic Distribution

Districts such as Wayanad, Idukki, Pathanamthitta, and Malappuram reported significant displacement. Relief camps housed thousands annually during peak monsoon seasons. During the study period, internal displacement in Kerala showed clear district-level concentration. Wayanad accounted for approximately 28% of total displacement cases, largely due to recurrent landslides and intense monsoon-triggered slope failures in its highland terrain. Idukki contributed around 25%, primarily driven by landslides, dam-related flood releases, and heavy rainfall events affecting vulnerable hill communities. Pathanamthitta represented nearly 22% of displacement incidents, as riverine flooding and dam overflows during extreme monsoon periods significantly impacted low-lying settlements along the Pamba basin. Meanwhile, Malappuram accounted for about 18%, with a combination of flood-induced inundation and localized landslides contributing to population movement. The remaining 7% was distributed among other districts experiencing comparatively lower but still notable displacement events. Collectively, these districts consistently reported the highest relief camp occupancy during peak monsoon seasons, housing thousands of affected residents annually and highlighting the spatial concentration of climate-induced displacement risks across Kerala.

District-wise Internal Displacement in Kerala

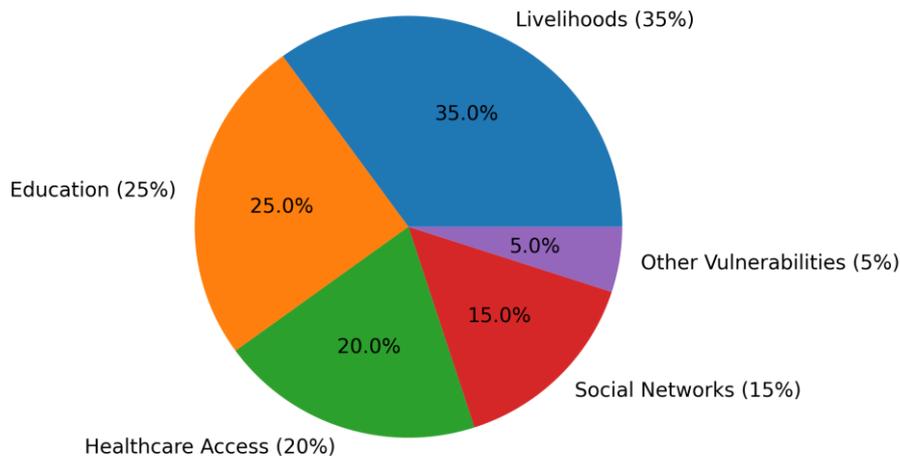


2.3 Socio-Economic Impact on IDPs

Internal displacement had multidimensional impacts, affecting key aspects of social and economic life. Approximately 35% of the disruption was related to livelihood losses, particularly in agriculture, fishing, and daily wage labor, where income sources were directly tied to environmental stability. Around 25% of the impact was observed in the education sector, as schools were damaged, temporarily closed, or converted into relief camps, causing learning interruptions. Nearly 20% of displacement-related hardship was associated with reduced access to healthcare, with medical facilities either overwhelmed or physically inaccessible during disaster events. An estimated 15% of the impact

involved the breakdown of social networks, weakening community support systems and increasing psychological stress. The remaining 5% reflected broader secondary vulnerabilities, which disproportionately affected marginalised groups including low-income households, women, elderly persons, and socially disadvantaged communities who faced greater exposure to risk and slower recovery trajectories.

Impact of Internal Displacement on Communities



3.1 Role of NGOs in Emergency Response

3.1.1 Rescue and Immediate Relief

During disaster events and displacement crises, NGOs played a crucial role in rescue operations and the provision of immediate relief assistance. Leveraging their strong local networks and community-based presence, these organizations were able to mobilize volunteers quickly and reach affected populations, particularly in remote and geographically challenging regions. Volunteers actively participated in evacuation efforts, assisted vulnerable individuals including the elderly, children, and persons with disabilities and supported coordination with local authorities. NGOs organized and distributed essential relief materials such as food kits, clean drinking water, clothing, blankets, medicines, and sanitation supplies to ensure basic survival needs were met during the critical initial phase. Temporary shelters and relief camps were supported with hygiene kits and health awareness initiatives to prevent the outbreak of communicable diseases. Their grassroots connections enabled faster identification of marginalized and hard-to-reach households, reducing response delays and ensuring more inclusive aid distribution. Overall, the proactive engagement of NGOs significantly strengthened immediate disaster response mechanisms, complementing government efforts and enhancing community resilience during the most vulnerable period following displacement.

3.1.2 Relief Camp Support

Civil society organisations played a vital role in strengthening relief camp management and ensuring humane living conditions for displaced populations. Their interventions focused on maintaining camp sanitation through the installation and regular cleaning of temporary toilets, waste disposal systems, and hygiene awareness initiatives to prevent the spread of communicable diseases. Ensuring access to safe drinking water was another key priority, with organizations arranging water purification units, bottled water distribution, and storage facilities to meet daily needs. Special attention was given to maternal and child healthcare by organizing medical camps, providing prenatal and postnatal care support, distributing nutritional supplements, and facilitating immunization services for children. In addition, civil society groups contributed significantly to protection services within camps, addressing issues such as gender-based violence prevention, child protection, psychosocial counseling, and safeguarding the rights of vulnerable groups. Through coordinated efforts with local authorities, these organizations enhanced the overall safety, dignity, and well-being of displaced individuals residing in relief camps.

3.1.3 Psychosocial and Mental Health Support

Displacement frequently resulted in significant psychological distress, including trauma, anxiety, grief, and uncertainty about the future. The sudden loss of homes, livelihoods, and community structures deeply affected individuals across all age groups, with children, women, and the elderly being particularly vulnerable. In response, NGOs and mental health professionals initiated psychosocial support programs within relief camps and affected communities. These interventions included individual and group counselling services aimed at helping survivors process traumatic experiences and rebuild emotional resilience. Child-friendly spaces were established to provide safe environments where children could engage in structured play, creative activities, and informal learning, thereby restoring a sense of normalcy and security. Community therapy sessions and support groups encouraged collective healing by fostering dialogue, shared experiences, and mutual support among displaced individuals. Through these comprehensive psychosocial interventions, NGOs contributed not only to immediate emotional stabilisation but also to longer-term mental well-being and social recovery in displacement-affected communities.

4.1 Role in Rehabilitation and Recovery

4.1.1 Housing Reconstruction

In the post-disaster recovery phase, NGOs played a pivotal role in housing reconstruction by collaborating with donors, local authorities, and community stakeholders to rebuild damaged and destroyed homes. Emphasis was placed on adopting safer and more resilient construction methods, incorporating disaster-resistant designs suited to local environmental conditions such as flood-prone or landslide-sensitive areas. NGOs facilitated access to financial grants, material support, and phased funding mechanisms to enable affected families to reconstruct their houses with dignity and ownership. In addition to monetary assistance, technical guidance was provided through engineers, architects, and trained field staff who ensured adherence to safety standards, improved structural stability, and compliance with local building regulations. Community participation was encouraged throughout the reconstruction process, strengthening transparency and accountability while fostering a sense of collective recovery. By integrating financial aid with technical expertise, NGOs contributed significantly to building back safer and enhancing long-term resilience against future climate-related hazards.

4.1.2 Livelihood Restoration

Livelihood restoration formed a central component of long-term recovery efforts, as displacement had severely disrupted income-generating activities across affected communities. NGOs implemented comprehensive programs aimed at rebuilding economic stability and reducing dependency on relief assistance. These initiatives included micro-finance schemes that provided small loans and revolving funds to help families restart small businesses, self-employment ventures, and household enterprises. Skill development and vocational training programs were organized to enhance employability, diversify income sources, and equip displaced individuals particularly youth and women with market-relevant competencies. In rural areas, agricultural input distribution such as seeds, fertilizers, tools, and livestock support enabled farmers to resume cultivation and restore food security. Special attention was given to fisherfolk communities through the provision of fishing nets, boat repairs, safety equipment, and financial assistance to revive marine and inland fishing activities. By combining financial inclusion, capacity building, and sector-specific support, livelihood restoration programs contributed to sustainable recovery, strengthened economic resilience, and reduced long-term vulnerability among displaced populations.

4.1.3 Disaster Risk Reduction

Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) emerged as a critical focus area in post-displacement recovery, with civil society organizations playing a proactive role in strengthening community preparedness and resilience. Recognizing that repeated climate-related hazards were intensifying vulnerability, these organizations promoted comprehensive community awareness programs aimed at educating residents about disaster risks, evacuation procedures, and safe shelter practices. Training workshops, mock drills, and participatory risk mapping exercises were conducted to build local capacity and foster a culture of preparedness. Civil society groups also emphasized early warning education, ensuring that communities understood how to interpret weather alerts, flood warnings, and landslide advisories issued by authorities. Efforts were made to bridge communication gaps, particularly in remote and marginalized regions, so that timely information could translate into swift action. Furthermore, sustainable land-use practices were encouraged to reduce long-term exposure to hazards, including promoting regulated construction in flood-prone areas, soil conservation techniques in hilly regions, afforestation initiatives, and environmentally responsible coastal management. Through these integrated strategies, civil society organizations contributed significantly to minimizing future displacement risks and enhancing community resilience against recurring disasters.

5.1 Role of Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations

5.1.1 Volunteer Networks

Kerala's strong tradition of grassroots mobilization played a decisive role in strengthening disaster response and displacement management. Well-established volunteer networks enabled the rapid deployment of human resources during emergencies, ensuring timely assistance even in remote and severely affected regions. Youth groups, student organizations, neighborhood associations, religious institutions, and local community collectives actively organized relief drives, mobilizing donations, coordinating logistics, and supporting rescue operations. These volunteers assisted in evacuations, distributed food and essential supplies, managed relief camps, and facilitated communication between affected families and authorities. Their familiarity with local geography and community dynamics enhanced efficiency and reduced response time. Moreover, the spirit of collective action fostered social solidarity, reinforcing Kerala's reputation for community-centered disaster resilience. Through coordinated efforts and civic engagement, volunteer networks significantly complemented formal institutional responses and strengthened the overall humanitarian framework during displacement crises.

5.1.2 Religious Institutions

Religious institutions played a significant and compassionate role during periods of displacement, serving not only as places of worship but also as critical centers of humanitarian support. Churches, mosques, and temples across affected regions opened their premises as temporary relief shelters, providing safe accommodation to displaced families irrespective of caste, creed, or religious affiliation. These institutions facilitated the distribution of food, clothing, medicines, and essential supplies, often mobilizing donations through their congregational networks. Clergy members and faith-based volunteers assisted in coordinating relief efforts, offering emotional comfort, and fostering a sense of hope among affected individuals. Beyond material assistance, religious spaces became symbols of unity and social solidarity, reinforcing community cohesion during times of crisis. Their inclusive approach and trusted community presence significantly enhanced local resilience and complemented broader civil society and governmental disaster response mechanisms.

5.1.3 Digital Coordination

Digital platforms played an increasingly transformative role in disaster response and displacement management, enabling faster and more organized humanitarian action. Social media platforms were widely utilized to launch and promote fundraising campaigns, allowing individuals, civil society groups, and diaspora communities to contribute financial assistance quickly and transparently. These platforms also facilitated efficient volunteer coordination by sharing verified information regarding rescue needs, transportation support, material shortages, and relief camp requirements. Messaging applications and online groups helped streamline communication between volunteers, local authorities, and affected households. Additionally, digital tools supported real-time needs assessment through crowd-sourced updates, geotagged information, and live situation reports, which enabled rapid identification of urgent requirements such as food, medical aid, and evacuation assistance. By leveraging technology for communication, resource mobilization, and coordination, digital networks significantly enhanced the speed, reach, and accountability of relief operations during displacement crises.

6.1 Challenges Faced

6.1 Funding Constraints

Funding constraints emerged as a significant challenge in sustaining long-term recovery and rehabilitation efforts following repeated displacement events. While immediate disaster responses often attracted substantial public donations and institutional funding, prolonged or recurring disasters gradually led to donor fatigue, reducing the availability of consistent financial support. As emergency attention shifted over time, rehabilitation initiatives such as housing reconstruction, livelihood restoration, and psychosocial support faced delays or scaling back due to limited resources. Smaller civil society organizations were particularly affected, as they relied heavily on short-term grants and public contributions. The unpredictability of funding cycles also hindered strategic planning and the implementation of comprehensive, multi-year recovery programs. Consequently, funding constraints not only slowed rehabilitation progress but also risked increasing long-term vulnerability among displaced populations, highlighting the need for more sustainable and diversified financing mechanisms in disaster management frameworks.

6.2 Coordination Gaps

Coordination gaps posed notable challenges during the initial phases of disaster response and displacement management. In the absence of streamlined communication channels and clearly defined operational roles, multiple NGOs and volunteer groups sometimes provided overlapping services in certain locations, leading to duplication of aid such as food distribution or material supplies. At the same time, other affected areas remained underserved due to uneven information flow and logistical limitations. Communication gaps between civil society organizations and state agencies further complicated relief efforts, as delays in data sharing, beneficiary identification, and resource allocation hindered optimal coordination. The lack of centralized real-time information systems occasionally resulted in inefficiencies, misallocation

of resources, and confusion among beneficiaries. Although coordination mechanisms improved over time through joint meetings and district-level disaster management frameworks, the initial fragmentation underscored the importance of integrated planning, data transparency, and collaborative governance in effective displacement response strategies.

6.3 Structural Vulnerabilities

Recurring displacement in Kerala exposed deeper structural vulnerabilities embedded within socio-environmental and developmental frameworks. Repeated disaster events highlighted unsafe settlement patterns, particularly the expansion of housing in floodplains, coastal erosion zones, and landslide-prone hill slopes, where communities remained highly exposed to natural hazards. Environmental degradation further intensified risks, as deforestation, quarrying activities, wetland encroachment, and unregulated land-use changes weakened ecological buffers that traditionally mitigated floods and landslides. Moreover, the escalating impacts of climate change manifested through erratic monsoon patterns, extreme rainfall events, rising sea levels, and intensified storm systems have amplified the frequency and severity of disasters, thereby increasing displacement vulnerability. These structural challenges demonstrate that displacement is not solely a humanitarian issue but also a developmental and governance concern, requiring long-term planning, sustainable land management, and climate-adaptive policy interventions to reduce future risks.

7.1 Findings and Recommendations

7.1 Key Findings

The study reveals several critical insights into the role of civil society in displacement management. First, NGOs significantly enhanced disaster response efficiency by leveraging grassroots networks, rapid mobilization mechanisms, and localized knowledge, thereby complementing formal state interventions. Second, strong community trust in civil society actors played a crucial role in strengthening relief operations, facilitating smoother aid distribution, beneficiary identification, and participatory recovery processes. However, despite effective emergency response, long-term rehabilitation efforts particularly housing reconstruction, livelihood restoration, and psychosocial support remain underfunded, often constrained by donor fatigue and short-term funding cycles. While coordination between NGOs and state agencies improved progressively through structured meetings and district-level frameworks, institutional strengthening is still required to ensure seamless information sharing, role clarity, and integrated disaster governance. Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of collaborative, sustainable, and structurally integrated approaches to displacement management in Kerala.

7.2 Recommendations

To enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of displacement management strategies, several key policy recommendations emerge from the study. First, there is a need to establish formal NGO–government coordination frameworks that clearly define roles, streamline communication channels, and institutionalize joint planning and data-sharing mechanisms at state and district levels. Such structured collaboration would minimize duplication of services and improve resource allocation efficiency. Second, developing long-term and diversified funding mechanisms for rehabilitation is essential to address persistent gaps in housing reconstruction, livelihood restoration, and psychosocial support. Dedicated disaster resilience funds and multi-year financing models could ensure continuity beyond the immediate relief phase. Third, climate adaptation strategies must be systematically integrated into displacement planning, including resilient infrastructure development, sustainable land-use regulation, and risk-informed settlement policies. Finally, strengthening community-based disaster preparedness systems through awareness programs, local capacity-building, early warning education, and participatory risk mapping will enhance grassroots resilience and reduce future displacement risks. Together, these recommendations advocate for a more coordinated, climate-responsive, and community-centered framework for managing internal displacement.

8.1 Conclusion

Recurring disasters between 2020 and 2025 have firmly established internal displacement as a persistent and structural challenge in Kerala rather than a series of isolated humanitarian emergencies. Intensified monsoon floods, recurrent landslides in high-range districts, coastal erosion along vulnerable shorelines, and cyclonic disturbances from the Arabian Sea have repeatedly forced communities to evacuate their homes, disrupting livelihoods, education, healthcare access, and social stability. These recurring events have exposed the deep interlinkages between environmental vulnerability, development patterns, and climate variability. The frequency and scale of displacement during this period highlight that the issue is not merely a short-term crisis response concern but a long-term governance and sustainability challenge requiring integrated planning and climate-sensitive policy frameworks.

Within this evolving risk landscape, NGOs and civil society organizations played a transformative and multi-dimensional role in supporting internally displaced persons (IDPs). Their contributions extended far beyond the distribution of immediate relief materials to include rescue operations, relief camp management, psychosocial and mental health support, housing reconstruction, livelihood restoration, and disaster risk reduction initiatives. By leveraging grassroots networks, mobilizing volunteers, coordinating donor partnerships, and utilizing digital platforms for rapid response, these organizations ensured that assistance reached marginalized and hard-to-reach populations efficiently. Their flexibility, community trust, and localized presence significantly strengthened the humanitarian ecosystem, enabling faster response times and more inclusive service delivery during periods of crisis. A defining feature of Kerala's displacement response was the synergy between civil society engagement and state disaster management mechanisms. Grassroots participation enhanced transparency, improved beneficiary identification, and fostered collective ownership of recovery processes. Community-based interventions, volunteer networks, and faith-based institutions reinforced social solidarity, demonstrating how participatory disaster governance can improve both efficiency and equity in crisis management. This collaborative model illustrated that resilient disaster response systems depend not only on institutional capacity but also on social capital, trust, and coordinated civic action. Looking ahead, the persistence of displacement risks necessitates a strategic shift from reactive relief to proactive resilience-building. Future policies must institutionalize structured NGO–government coordination frameworks, secure long-term and diversified rehabilitation funding, and embed climate adaptation strategies within development planning. Addressing unsafe settlement patterns, regulating environmentally fragile zones, promoting sustainable land-use practices, and strengthening community-based preparedness systems will be critical to mitigating future displacement. Ultimately, reducing climate-induced vulnerabilities and ensuring sustainable recovery pathways remain essential to safeguarding vulnerable populations and building a more resilient Kerala.

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