WHEN THE RUBBER HITS THE ROAD
LOCAL LEADERSHIP IN THE FIRST 100 DAYS OF THE ROHINGYA CRISIS RESPONSE
RESEARCHED AND WRITTEN IN PARTNERSHIP WITH NIRAPAD
December 2017
INTRODUCTION

The international community has committed to a humanitarian system that is locally owned and led. This means a shift of power, resources and decision-making to local and national responders in humanitarian action. But how is this manifested during a humanitarian response of the scale and complexity of the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh?

This rapid real-time analysis considers how the global localisation agenda has influenced the current operational response. It explores how localisation has affected key areas of leadership, funding, surge, partnerships, coordination and complementarity. It also considers emerging localisation practices that could be scaled up in future responses. The paper is intended to stimulate discussion and inform practice. It prompts questions about what happens when localisation moves from theory to practice.

On the surface, not much has changed in the way humanitarian action has unfolded in Bangladesh. Funding has still flowed largely to international actors; international surge staff, many with no context experience, arrived in their hundreds; and coordination continued to be dominated by international actors. Below the surface, however, shifts are underway. The Government of Bangladesh has taken a strong leadership role that has challenged the default international systems. National and local NGOs are playing a key role in the response and some international actors are partnering with national actors more intentionally. Is it too little or too much of a shift? Does it represent the transformation that was envisaged at the World Humanitarian Summit, and a positive step towards fundamental change? Or has it taken us backwards, with weakened relationships leaving the localisation debate more polarised than ever?

How is the humanitarian imperative to save lives balanced with a focus on ensuring the response is locally led?
METHODOLOGY

This practice note is based on consultations with key national and international actors operating in-country. The research was undertaken with a national partner who undertook all the field-based interviews. It was a high-level rapid analysis that provides insight into emerging themes and issues from the perspective of operational actors.

- **21** key informant interviews with international and local organisations, United Nations, government officials and NGO networks
- **online survey**
- **35** document reviews
- **5** informal discussions with NGO members who have practical work experience in the recent Rohingya response
- **observation** of operational national and international actors including in coordination meetings
In Bangladesh both government and local civil society play a prominent role in disaster response. Existing disaster management structures have responded effectively to natural disasters over many years and strong leadership is in place.

National leadership was evident in the restrictions placed on INGOs entering the country; in establishing a registration system that limited the operational role of INGOs, and in continuing to recognise the International Organisation of Migration as the international lead agency for refugee response coordination with the government. This decision was at odds with the default international designation of UNHCR as lead for refugee contexts, and has raised concerns about UNHCR being unable to ‘exercise in full its accountability for protection of refugees and contribute fully its capacity and
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These leadership decisions present an interesting dilemma for an international system that has pre-designated lead agencies and assumed roles for INGOs. It is relatively uncharted and challenging territory, but should be welcomed and discussed in the localisation conversation.

It was noted that at the local level civil society organisations had little scope to take on leadership roles, particularly as international funding for the response increased. Local responders noted that in the early stages decision-making and leadership of relief operations shifted from local NGOs and communities to key UN bodies and a few international organisations. Many stakeholders noted that three months into the response local organisations are playing largely implementation roles rather than leadership and decision-making roles. This is reflected in perceptions of leadership and decision-making captured in the survey results in Figure 1.

The greatest leadership gap, nationally and internationally, has been in creating space for constructive discussion. An honest appraisal is needed of the strengths and weaknesses of different actors and potential complementary roles to deliver the most effective response. The global conversation on localisation has not supported constructive discussion at country level. A global focus on the binary nature of localisation and a polarising discourse – ‘do you go local or save lives?’ – has contributed to mistrust and a combative approach that manifests itself in the operational realities of response efforts in the Rohingya crisis.

Figure 1: To what extent do you feel the response is nationally led?

To what extent do local and national actors have control over decision making in the response?

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2 Indicative data from perceptions survey of local and international responders. The survey results are indicative and not statistically significant
Currently, funding allocations do not reflect a shift towards more direct funding of national actors. The majority of funding, 49 per cent, has been allocated to three UN agencies – IOM, UNHCR and WFP. The largest-funded international NGO is ACF at 7.8 per cent. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee and Bangladesh Red Crescent Society were the only two national organisations to receive funding, at 2.1 per cent and 1.3 per cent respectively. Although this data is incomplete (e.g., it does not reflect funding indirectly allocated to national actors), it does not suggest a substantial shift towards meeting the Grand Bargain commitment of 25 per cent of funding allocated directly to local actors by 2020.

SURGE CAPACITY

Several factors indicated a shift in the way the international community uses surge to support local capacities. It was commonly noted that as far as possible surge capacity was drawn from regional rather than global responders prioritising individuals with in-country experience. Surge has been used to support capacity and empower local partners to engage in the response. This included, for example, support to local staff to lead in planning and coordination forums that might otherwise be dominated by international actors. This was also evident at the community level, where surge capacity supported local actors’ roles in sectors such as site management and WASH.

Despite these positive observations international surge has largely sidelined national actors. Respondents noted that problems persisted with short term-deployments, weak handovers, and diversion of local actor time and resources to bring new international staff up to speed on context at each rotation. Questions were raised about the costs involved with such a large international presence, as well as cultural and language barriers compounded by these deployments.

PARTNERSHIPS

There are more partnerships between national and international actors in Bangladesh’s Rohingya refugee crisis response than in most previous responses. The effectiveness of these partnerships, however, was undermined by their short term and contractual nature. National actors have essentially become implementing partners rather than equal partners in leadership and decision-making.

Several factors contributed to this partnership dynamic. The registration system instituted at the national level limited the operational role of new INGOs, requiring them to partner with local

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3 Funding overview from top 20 largest organisations. NGO funding includes Bangladesh Red Crescent Society. Data from UN OCHA, Financial Tracking Service, accessed 5 December 2017
4 UN OCHA, Financial Tracking Service, accessed 5 December 2017
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organisations. This led to an influx of international actors seeking to work with the few local and national partners with an operational presence in Cox’s Bazar.

The result is that many INGOs are currently partnering with a very small number of local organisations. These local and national organisations are being stretched to capacity without partnership approaches and capacity support in place to manage the rapid scale-up. The effectiveness and sustainability of these partnerships is undermined by their short-term and contractual nature, as well as heavy accountability and reporting requirements.

There was a strong sense that international and national actors are both accountable for strengthening the partnership approach in the response. The very real risk that capacity of local actors is overwhelmed in managing multiple contracts and meeting international demands needs to be jointly managed and addressed, with the collective goal of effective delivery of humanitarian assistance.

COORDINATION

International co-leads

Food Security 🌽 WFP
Education 📚 UNICEF, SCI
WASH 🚗 ACF, UNICEF

National co-leads

Food Security 🌽 Mukti
Shelter 🏡 Caritas Bangladesh

Important steps were taken at the onset of the crisis to ensure local representation in coordination structures. NGO co-leads were designated to support each of the ISCG Sector Groups and Working Groups. To contribute to long-term capacity building it was recommended that NGO co-leads be nationally-based in Bangladesh and include a mix of local, national and International NGOs. Several other sectors have informal co-lead arrangements with government ministry counterparts and some task teams or working groups set up by sectors are also led or co-led by a mix of international and/or national NGOs.

The establishment of networks and coalitions for local organisations was also an important action for increasing the voice and representation for local organisations in humanitarian response structures. NGO networks, such and the NGO Coordination and Support Cell and the Cox’s Bazar Civil Society Network have worked to bridge information gaps and provide a common information point for NGOs engaging in wider coordination structures.

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5 Caritas Bangladesh is the local arm of the Catholic Church in-country.
Discussions between NGOs involved in the response and the ISCG (IOM/OCHA) led to agreement to form an NGO coordination and support cell. The cell provides coordination and support services for local, national and international NGO sector partners. It is formally hosted by the ISCG and staffed by one national and one international staff member. This matches with the overall ISCG structure, in which all positions have national/international counterparts.

In practice, however most coordination structures remain dominated by international actors. For example, while the Food Security, Education and WASH sectors have NGO co-leads, Food Security and Shelter are currently the only sectors co-led by national NGOs. Despite some positive steps, overall there was a general perception that the level of national representation in humanitarian coordination mechanisms led by the international community was low. This is reflected in Figure 2. Questions were also raised with regards to the focus on providing local actors with more space in international coordination mechanisms, instead of ways the international community can plug into local structures.

Figure 2: To what extent have local and national actors led coordination mechanisms?

19% 43% 24% 14% 0%
Not at all | Completely

‘National actors continued engaging with local government administration to move projects through. International actors coordinated through the ISCG-led structure.’
COMPLEMENTARITY

Stakeholders noted that despite international actors’ good intentions about complementing and supporting local NGO leadership in frontline service delivery, the operational reality has been challenging. The small number of local and national NGOs with adequate capacity reduced the quality of the response. At the same time, international actors have lacked the information and access needed to comprehensively fill gaps in the front-line response.

Mapping of complementary strengths amongst international and national organisations is required to facilitate an effective response. Stakeholders noted that there needs to be constructive dialogue on who is best placed to deliver on what and when. The current lack of comprehensive mapping and limited understanding of the capacity of local NGOs and INGOs to deliver programming is a serious limitation.

“We need to work collectively to support national entities in a strategic way that will truly support a way forward to increased localisation.”
A safe space for dialogue is missing. The international localisation discourse has set up a combative dynamic that hinders the conversation at the operational level. Actors in Bangladesh have the opportunity to overcome this through the intentional creation of a conversation that moves localisation further along the continuum from theory to practice. Key questions to guide the conversation could include:

**What combination of actors will bring the best humanitarian outcomes for the affected population?**

Whether global commitments to a more locally owned and led humanitarian system are providing the best outcomes for the displaced Rohingya population is unclear. The end goal of humanitarian assistance is to provide lifesaving services to affected populations, based on the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence. Who is best placed to provide humanitarian assistance should not be determined by local or international definitions but rather by who can meet the required needs, as expressed by the affected population. In this response, actors along the spectrum of national to international are required; identifying the best way each can contribute and then working out how to support each other is vital.

**What could be strengthened in the preparedness space?**

An initial glimpse into what is likely to be a long-lasting crisis suggests that the key to a more localised response during rapid-onset emergencies is preparedness and partnership. For localisation to be effective there needs to be institutional capacity building and established partnerships before the onset of a crisis. Further, we need to think through more creative approaches to capacity building based on a process of international and local actors learning from each other. Stakeholders indicated that localisation should not be imposed, but that national systems and response capacities and international commitments should be strengthened to enable localisation to occur.

**How can humanitarian actors better support localisation?**

Humanitarian actors have committed to humanitarian action that is ‘as local as possible and as international as necessary.’ Being able to uphold this commitment requires agreement on how to measure what is possible, using metrics for capacity and capability and for determining when and how international actors become necessary.

In this response, these metrics were not available. International actors largely defaulted to established humanitarian systems and behaviours. Some considered this necessary in the context of overburdened local and national actors; others defaulted to known approaches in the absence of operational clarity for localised approaches. The international community needs to grapple with some big questions: how it will measure the proportionality of its response to achieve localisation; how it can respond in a way that supports local capacity and partnerships, not overwhelm them; and how to balance respect for local leadership with international humanitarian principles and standards and accountability to affected populations.

National actors also have an important part to play. The true potential of localisation can only be realised if there is an accurate picture of the capacities and capabilities of national actors. In this response, the limits to national and local capacities are not clearly articulated; this may reflect local and national organisations’ discomfort in requesting support or defining their strengths alongside their weaknesses. All humanitarian actors have responsibility for supporting an open and respectful conversation that makes the analysis of what is possible locally a reality.

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6 Grand Bargain Initiative https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/5861
Local Characteristics of the response

**pre-Aug 24: Pre-mass population influx**
- Influx of Rohingya population increasing daily
- First responders are local organisations, UN, Red Cross Movement and INGOs already operating in the area

**post-Aug 24 – first 2 weeks: Mass influx of affected populations**
- Approximately one million Rohingya residing in the camps
- First responders overwhelmed with scale and speed of population influx
- Government of Bangladesh extend relief operations to newly arriving populations and accepts support from international community

**Weeks 2-6: Scaling up humanitarian response**
- National and international humanitarian actors scale up humanitarian response
- Balance of control over relief operations shifts from national and local actors to key UN bodies and a few international organizations
- Government of Bangladesh places further restrictions on new projects and the number of international agencies responding
- Local organisations advocate for greater role and leadership over response efforts
- NGO support and coordination cell set up to ensure greater linkages between international and local responders
- CXB-CSO Forum established to provide a greater voice and representation of local NGOs

**Week 6 to present: Ensuring rapid and effective delivery of assistance**
- Increased attention on minimising gaps and incorporating local and national NGOs in coordination mechanisms
- Increased attention to capacity develop and quality
- Increased attention to leveraging governmental structures to develop capacity and to facilitate smooth funding disbursement for local NGOs

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