



# WHEN THE RUBBER HITS THE ROAD

LOCAL LEADERSHIP IN THE FIRST 100 DAYS  
OF THE ROHINGYA CRISIS RESPONSE

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# INTRODUCTION

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**T**he 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.

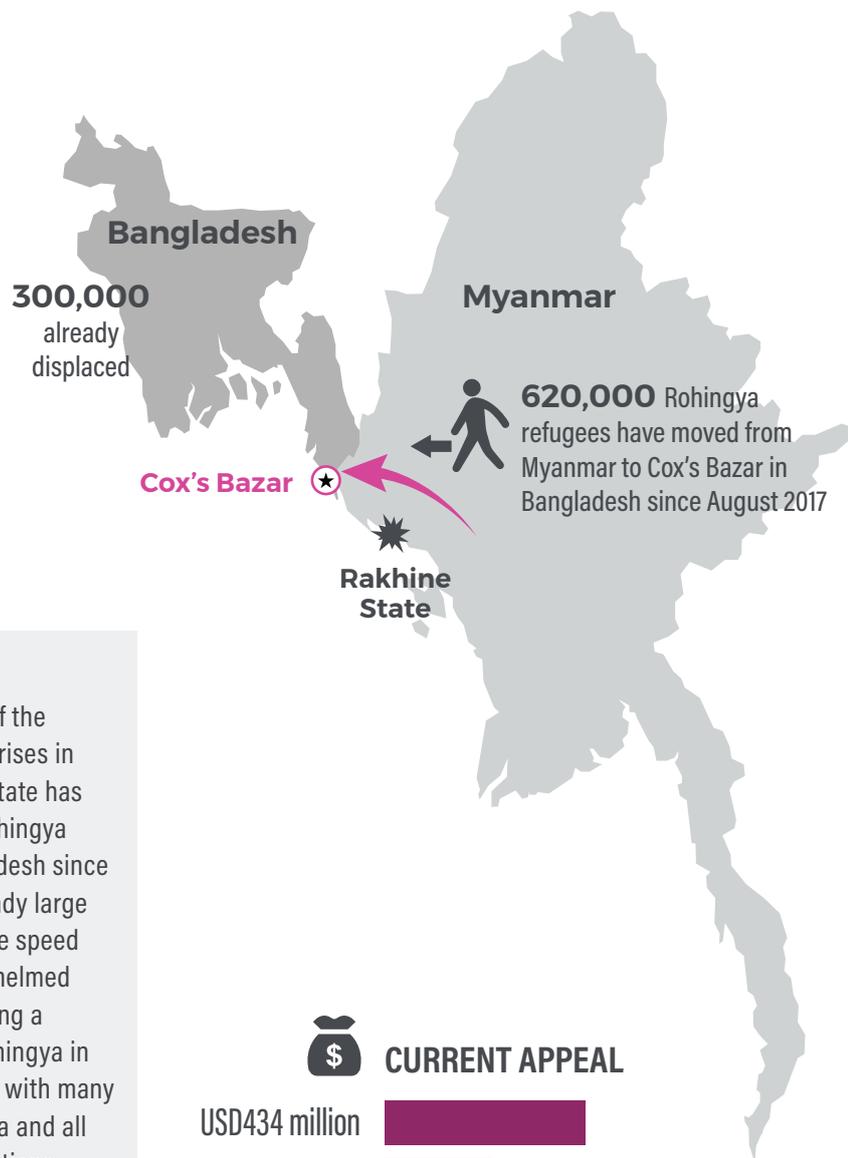
Below the surface, however, shifts are underway. The Government of Bangladesh has taken a strong leadership role that has challenged the default international systems. National and local NGOs are playing a key role in the response and some international actors are partnering with national actors more 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?**

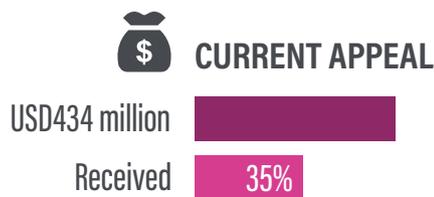




## Crisis Overview



**The Rohingya response** is one of the most complex and fast-growing crises in this region. Violence in Rakhine State has driven an estimated 620,000+ Rohingya refugees into Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh since 25 August 2017, adding to an already large caseload residing in that area. The speed and scale of the influx has overwhelmed services in existing camps, creating a humanitarian emergency. The Rohingya in Cox's Bazar are highly vulnerable, with many having experienced severe trauma and all living in overcrowded camp conditions.



## LEADERSHIP

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.

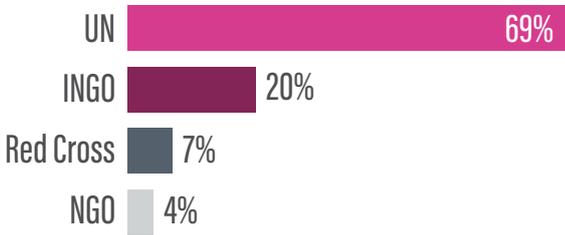
National leadership was evident in the restrictions placed on INGOs entering the country; in establishing a registration system

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



# FUNDING ALLOCATIONS

## Overview of funding breakdown of top 20 largest funded agencies<sup>3</sup>



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.<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>3</sup> 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.  
<sup>4</sup> UN OCHA, Financial Tracking Service, accessed 5 December 2017



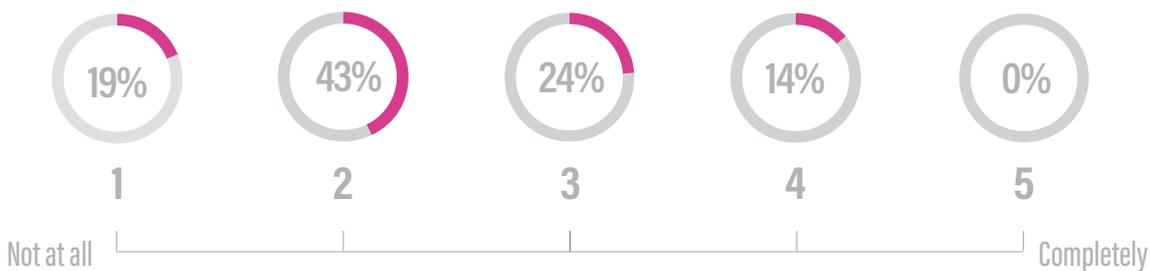


Discussions between NGOs involved in the response and the ISCG (IOM/OCHA) led to agreement to form an NGO coordination and support cell. The cell provides coordination and support services for local, national and international NGO sector partners. It is formally hosted by the ISCG and staffed by one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

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.

In practice, however most coordination structures remain dominated by international

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



**‘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.'**

# LOCALLY OWNED AND LED – THE WAY FORWARD

**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.’<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> Grand Bargain Initiative <https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/3861>



