

Identifying Critical Priorities for Key Humanitarian Issues and Capacity Building Needs for Bangladesh



Recently Christian Aid organized a roundtable titled "Identifying Critical Priorities for Key Humanitarian Issues and Capacity Building Needs for Bangladesh". Here we publish a summary of the discussions.



Shakeb Nabi, Country Director, Christian Aid and Chair, National Steering Committee, Shifting the Power Initiative in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of the most disaster-prone countries. In addition to natural disasters such as flood, cyclone and river erosion we are facing new kinds of challenges such as electrocution, slum fire, waterlogging and so on. There has been drastic reduction in the number of deaths due to natural disasters. But the situation has improved little with regards to loss of property. On an average, we lose around 3-5 percent of our GDP due to disasters.

The existing ecosystem of humanitarian assistance is not balanced in the favor of the local actors. Community people and organizations at the local level have little involvement in the policymaking process of humanitarian intervention. They are basically being perceived as a beneficiary and local level implementers. There has to be a paradigm shift in the way we look at Humanitarian Ecosystem. In order to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian aid there is an urgent need to shift the power balance in favor of the affected communities and local level organizations.

Again, the whole architecture of humanitarian assistance is patriarchal. If we take the example of our cyclone response programmes, only 10 percent of responders are female. This imbalance hinders effective gender-specific response in an emergency situation. We should consider gender dimensions in our relief distribution activities and highlight the needs and priorities of women. We believe that women led response is an inclusive response and needs to be promoted.

Another important area of power imbalance is local governance. Most of the policies are controlled by the central government and the local government have little say in the policymaking process. So we want to shift this power balance in favor of local governments where they will have more say in designing the structure of humanitarian intervention. In the 'Shifting the Power' project we are trying to identify these gaps and find solutions to make our humanitarian interventions more balanced and effective.

There are three key verticals in this project. One is 'aptitude' which talks about capacity building of the grassroots community and organizations. The other is 'attitude' which refers to larger representation of the local agents in humanitarian architecture and its governance system. The third is 'knowledge management'. It is not only about just delivery or aid distribution. We are putting equal emphasis on learning from local organizations and communities and disseminating the lessons to a larger audience.



Dr. Ehsanur Rahman, Executive Director, Dhaka Ahsania Mission and Co-chair, National Steering Committee, Shifting the Power Initiative in Bangladesh

Disaster happens at the local level. The community, organizations and administration at the local level are the first responders and to a crisis. They also have knowledge about indigenous resilience practices. But the local organizations have insufficient resources to fight disasters. If they get proper funding they

can effectively fight such disasters.



Kazi Shahidur Rahman, Humanitarian Affairs Specialist, UN Resident Coordinator Office

Earlier, local NGOs used to do the coordination work of humanitarian assistance. But now the UN is taking the responsibility of coordination as the local NGOs and INGOs are asking for its guardianship. The World Disaster Report 2016 refers to quick response system. Are the local organizations capable of responding to small scale disaster? Though they have the capacity to respond to small disasters they generally wait for funding from donors. We need to change this attitude. Our local actors need to join hands and work as a team. It will reduce dependency on foreign resources.

With increased capacity of local organizations and support from the government we are now able to reduce loss of lives. But we are yet to alleviate sufferings of the disaster-affected community. It is closely connected with ensuring safety and dignity of those people.



Dr. Dibalok Singha, Executive Director, Dushtha Shasthya Kendra (DSK)

We are still struggling to involve the local community in the disaster management system. It often happens that the assistance provided to the affected people does not suit their needs. The government does not involve non-government organizations in the disaster management system. There is a huge scope of using the expertise of local organizations to assess the needs of the local community and support them effectively.

There are some funds for which only foreign organizations can apply. When we talk about shifting power we should also talk about changing such discriminatory attitudes towards local organizations. We should work to strengthen the relationship between the government and local organizations.



Sajid Raihan, Deputy Director, Programme, Policy and Campaign, Action Aid Bangladesh


When we talk about shifting power we should focus on building capacity of the local actors such as the community, local NGOs and civil society organizations. If they become capable of responding to a disaster the power will automatically shift to their favor. We also need to come out of the traditional definition of donors. If they remain donors and we are only receivers then the power inequality will persist. Our local communities have the capacity to fight small scale disasters. But in the existing top-down model we take decisions at the national and international level and send assistance to the community without letting their capacity flourish. Thus we are destroying the space where the local community can work in collaboration with the local government to create a sustainable disaster management system at the local level. Local NGOs should only play the role of facilitating communication between the community and local government bodies.

There are certain compliance issues which is really difficult for the local organizations to meet. In those cases, we need to bring some flexibility in the compliance mechanism.



Murshida Akhter, Humanitarian Program Manager, Oxfam

We have achieved some success in involving women in disaster management programmes. Earlier they were only recipients. In the cyclone of 1970, the ratio of human loss of women to men was 5:1; now it has come down to 2:1. But we still have a long way to go. We should adopt a women-led humanitarian assistance model. We need more women leaders at the policy level.



Anjum Nahed Chowdhury Lucky, Gana Unnayan Kendra (GUK), Gaibandha

We never recognize the capacity of women. Women are the first responders in any disaster. A woman can address the needs of all the family members. If we engage women in our disaster management efforts we will get comprehensive results. We should also invest in building their capacity to fight disasters.



Rahima Sultana Kazal, Executive Director, Association for Voluntary Actions for Society (AVAS), Barisal


We undertook a women-led emergency response project after cyclone Mahasen. The women members did the survey, needs assessment, procurement and distribution. We found brilliant results through the project. The women were able to reach the genuinely affected people, particularly the affected women. Now we are doing a project titled Women Resilience Index where the majority of the team members are women. We need to train more women leaders to create a pool of women responders at the grassroots level. In every village, there is a women's cooperative supported by the government. We can train the members of these local bodies on disaster risk management.

We need to do proper need assessment of the affected community before providing them any assistance. After Roanu, when we asked a community about their urgent needs they only wanted stoves and kerosene fuel. In some cases they only needed medical counseling to overcome trauma. We tend to give them many things except what they need the most.



AFM Akhter Uddin, Executive Director, Uttara Development Program Society (UDPS)

Without support from the government we will not be able to bring any change in the existing power structure. We should involve them in this discussion.



Suman Ahsanul Islam, Director, Humanitarian Leadership Academy, Bangladesh Centre


Though the local organizations have the capacity to implement any project they are heavily dependent on donors and INGOs due to resource constraints. That's why they need to tap alternative funding sources. The private sector spends a large amount of money in their CSR programmes. If the government formulates a policy to channel these resources to local organizations to implement humanitarian assistance projects it will be a great boost for the local actors.

We need to increase the capacity of local government bodies for effective response in an emergency situation. The local organizations can be of great support in this regard. The government should recognize them and involve them in government programmes. It should also decentralize the government resources and create a pool fund at the local level from where local NGOs can seek funding support to fight small scale disasters.



Shahana Hayat, Manager, Humanitarian Talent Development, Save the Children in Bangladesh

I think local NGOs have enough capacity to implement disaster-related projects at the local level. If they need further improvement in any area such as procurement and monitoring we can provide them support accordingly. But these interventions need to be specific. We always talk about changing the mindset of the local NGOs but why are we silent about the attitude of INGOs and the UN? They have many things to learn from local organizations and communities.



Gawher Nayeem Wahra, Director, Disaster Management and Climate Change, BRAC

The donor agencies should change their attitude towards local organizations. They do not have the mindset to learn from the local NGOs.

At the local level, Social Welfare Ministry has a committee which supervises funds. Local organizations are members of this committee. In addition to the government fund the committee raises money from local sources. It can be a good source for funding disaster management projects at the local level.

We should work more with local government bodies. We always give them training but when any disaster occurs we do not involve them. We have little trust in them. We need to change our attitude towards local government bodies and find ways to involve them more effectively.

PKSF made a proposal that one percent of the profits from microfinance be allocated for disaster response. It could not make any headway due to opposition from a government regulatory body. However, we should push the government to consider the proposal seriously.



Tanjir Hossain, Head of Climate Change, Christian Commission for Development (CCDB)

Youths are natural responders in any emergency situation. In our country there are various youth groups and clubs at the university level, particularly in private universities. Unfortunately, most of the students engaged in these initiatives are only interested in improving their profile rather than making real efforts to bring positive changes at the local level. We need to change this mindset. They need to be motivated in working with humanitarian assistance programmes. We should also look beyond urban centers and reach the youths studying at the grassroots institutions. They can be a valuable local resource for fighting disasters. We should also include children because they can bring effective changes in the mindset of their families.



Shashanka Saadi, Head of Emergency Response Programme, BRAC International

We are not talking about the Disaster Management Act. There is a clear indication in the Act about resource mobilization at the local level. If we can tap that opportunity, the local organization will have a stake in local funds.

Our private sectors are basically spending their CSR funds from a charity perspective. Our private sector should have a clear goal in spending its CSR funds. They can learn from global examples such as Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In Uganda, when a private company donates 5-15 percent of its profit for humanitarian assistance and development work it automatically gets similar amount of tax rebate in return. Bangladesh Bank has taken an initiative from 2008 for Financial Sector CSR which is primarily focused to development initiatives. It has a mini-focus on relief work. This type of policy can be replicated for other private sectors at the national level. They need to be brought under a well-formulated pro-poor National CSR policy. We should start advocacy with private sector to emphasize humanitarian work (not only relief, more on disaster risk reduction & climate adaptation) in their CSR funding. We also need to clarify the stakes of the local community and local organizations in the CSR process and show private sector's social benefit from this initiative.



Sylvester Halder, Head of Special Programs, Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB)

We need to build talents at the local level. Local youths should be involved in the disaster management system. It will increase capacity of local communities as well as make our interventions more effective.

Dr. Ehsanur Rahman
Our economy is growing rapidly. The booming private sector of the country can be a vital source of funding for local organizations. We should take initiatives to tap this pool of funds in a structured way. At the same time we have to strengthen our response pool by incorporating our indigenous knowledge and local experiences. It will be a bottom-up approach where local initiatives will lead the national and international responses.

