



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

Localising the Rohingya refugee response

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For decades now, Rohingya refugees have been crossing the border into Bangladesh as unrest worsened in their native Rakhine, Myanmar. Following a smaller refugee influx in 2016, over 700,000 refugees subsequently fled across the border in August 2017, at a speed and scale surpassing greatly previous influxes.

"Host communities were the first responders," says Abu Morshed Chowdhury, chief executive of PHALS, an NGO in Cox's Bazar. Earlier settled refugees, the first of whom arrived in 1978, and locals took in Rohingya families or at the very least allowed them to squat on their lands and provided them with food. So too, did local authorities and civil society organisations which had been witnessing the incoming refugees for decades.

A December 2017 report by the international Humanitarian Advisory Group and the national organisation Nirapad, "When the rubber hits the road: Local leadership in the first 100 days of the Rohingya crisis response", notes that the humanitarian response in Bangladesh was earlier local-led but as the crisis grew and international funding increased, UN agencies and INGOs took over especially in leadership roles.

Earlier, INGOs faced restrictions in operating in the two official refugee camps and the numerous other makeshift

settlements in Cox's Bazar, needing to partner with local organisations in order to work with the refugees. The International Organisation of Migration (IOM), together with the government, was designated to lead the refugee response.

However, soon after the 2017 influx, the report notes "decision-making and leadership of relief operations shifted from local NGOs and communities to key UN bodies and a few international organisations." As early as three months into the response, local organisations' roles were narrowed down to implementation and played no part in leadership and decision-making.

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Currently, the majority of funding (69 percent) goes to UN agencies, followed by INGOs (20 percent) and the Red Cross (7 percent) and national organisations receive only four percent.

How much of aid is spent on transactional costs?
The Cox's Bazar CSO-NGO Forum

(CCNF), a platform of local NGOs and civil society organisations, recently brought out a study on localisation of aid and transparency. Presented in a press conference in Dhaka on February 12, the study also outlined a cost breakdown of an INGO operating in the camps.

"We estimated the costs based on our knowledge of local operational costs and how many expatriates were working in the organisation," says Rezaul Karim Chowdhury, co-chair of CCNF and executive director of COAST Trust. The INGO, according to the study estimates, spent only 18 percent of their funds on their programmes for the refugees while the rest 82 percent was spent on operation costs.

Cox's Bazar has seen a revolving door of expatriate workers, usually hired on short-term contracts, flying in to work in the camps. From their homes and hotels, the aid agencies's four-wheel drives barrel 40 kilometres south from Cox's Bazar to Ukhia every day.

According to the Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG), which coordinates the work of all the humanitarian agencies, however, more than 70 percent of the 1,200 UN staff in Cox's Bazar are Bangladeshis and there are currently 443 expatriate workers employed by NGOs, filling just 2.5 percent of total positions.

The 2017 localisation report also states that when international actors tend to dominate the response, "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."

"Their [UN agencies and INGOs] operational costs are very high," says Karim, emphasising the expense of around 600 aid agencies' vehicles that locals see clog the narrow roads of Ukhia every day. The study also notes that local children can no longer walk to school due to the heavy traffic.

Based on the 2018 Joint Response Plan (JRP), which called for USD 950 million in total aid for the refugees, the CCNF study estimates that every Rohingya family could have been allocated aid worth USD 351 per month. This number, to be sure, is based on a rather simplistic calculation dividing the total aid received up to late last year by the number of refugee families.

Total aid, of course, include overhead and management costs and among other allocations, funding for host communities. "But this is the problem. They are not transparent at all. They do not reveal how much funding is being allocated for the refugees and the host communities," says Karim.

CCNF's study also interviewed local and international NGOs and UN agencies about working practices in Cox's Bazar. One concern highlighted by local NGOs was that INGOs and UN agencies poached their staff; according to Karim, 25 percent of COAST Trust's staff have been hired by UN agencies and INGOs (which are able to pay higher salaries).

Launched in mid-February, the 2019 JRP appeal is for USD 920 million in aid for the refugees in addition to over 330,000 members of the host communities.