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The appeal outlines the needs, priorities and what funds will be used for in each sector, says Nayana Bose, spokesperson for the ISCG. "More than half the appeal (57 percent) is for food security, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), shelter and non-food items (NFI) sectors. Food assistance alone is 28 percent of the overall appeal. This is basic life-saving humanitarian support for a vulnerable population fully dependent on humanitarian aid until conditions become conducive for their voluntary return."

The case for localisation

Calls for localisation of aid efforts and aid transparency are not just demands of local organisations. These are requirements donors and aid organisations pledged to fulfill. The Grand Bargain, signed at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, calls for a commitment that 25 percent of funding be allocated to local and national actors working in humanitarian settings and to reduce transactional costs, by 2020. Greater transparency is the primary goal of the agreement.

Another global agreement is the Charter for Change, which calls for promoting and acknowledging the role of local actors. "If they [UN agencies and INGOs] pledged to fulfill these agreements, why don't they follow it in Bangladesh?" asks Karim.

The "whole-of-society" approach is called for in the global compact on refugees where in addition to the state and international aid organisations, non-traditional development stakeholders such as the private sector and even financial institutions are involved in the humanitarian response.

"If local communities and civil society are not consulted, this will not be a sustainable approach. That is why we are demanding the whole-of-society approach in Cox's Bazar," says Morshed.

The 2019 JRP says agencies will develop a "roadmap to localisation" in partnership with local and national organisations and civil society. "There is commitment to strengthen national capacities at all levels, including to support leadership and coordination by the Government," says Jon Hoisaeter, senior coordinator for the Rohingya refugee response.

Local organisations are thought of as not having sufficient capacity to handle a humanitarian situation of this scale, hence the international 'responders' dominating the leadership. But, points out Karim, local organisations' staff have been poached by large NGOs and UN agencies operating in the camps. "If they take our staff and say that we don't have the capacity to deal with the humanitarian situation, isn't that contradictory?"

"The idea is for international NGOs and UN agencies to help expand the capacity of local NGOs, so that they are ready to take over the response in the future when international actors are gone," said Dominika Arsenuik, NGO platform coordinator of the Bangladesh Rohingya Response.

Karim agrees, suggesting that the INGOs and UN agencies contribute to aid efforts by ensuring monitoring and capacity development. "But the work should be done by civil society, NGOs and local government. This way, operation costs would be reduced significantly." Karim notes, for example, that the Grand Bargain calls for aid organisations to use a common logistical pool in areas such as transport.

Another issue is local context. "The most important thing now is security and conflict sensitivity," says Karim. He argues that Cox's Bazar-specific issues such as religious fundamentalism in the area, fighting between host communities and the refugees are best handled by local organisations and government.

Local organisations are also worried about international aid once the next big international humanitarian crisis occurs. "Aid is declining by the day. So, we are urging that operation costs at the field level be minimised. Because the money is supposed to go to the Rohingya refugees and the host communities," says Morshed. "Ultimately the responsibility [of the refugees] will fall on our shoulders, those who are the host community, when the aid dries up."

"Some progress has been made, but longer-term efforts are required by all stakeholders, in line with the recommendation that international and local actors working with government officials should develop a three-year timeline of transition towards greater responsibility by local actors in managing and delivering the response," says Bose of ISCG.

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Those that work, often spew out yellowish, iron-heavy water. In Tala upazila of Sathkhira, locals have complained of having to drink yellowish and metal-heavy water which they pump out from their tube wells because they cannot afford to buy water that is treated through reverse osmosis or arsenic.

Aminul Islam, executive engineer of the Department of Public Health and Engineering (Sathkhira), says this is because the geological conditions of this area is so different here that even if a tube-well gives clean water for a few months after its construction, the water source soon becomes contaminated.

"The government has set up a few Arsenic Iron Removal Plants (AIRP) and Reverse Osmosis plants (ROP) to treat this water but these have a limited capacity and cannot treat litre upon litre of water. But this treated water is not free of cost. Each litre costs somewhere between 30 paisa to two taka," says Aminul.

This has also given rise to some private business running ROPs and AIRPs which sell jars of treated water to locals at one taka per litre. Both the economically well-off and the extreme poor have to rely on this which ends up creating a gross inequality in the region and in fact in the entirety of the country.

For example, in many areas of the capital (except for most urban slums), the average cost for month-long (ideally unlimited) water supply is BDT 400. This is meant to cover water used for drinking, laundry, cooking, cleaning and other miscellaneous uses.

Contrastingly, in rural Sylhet, where my aunt lives, the water supply is completely free of cost. Their deep-water tube-well is just a minute's walk and they have a direct supply of water to their house. This means they do not have to spend long hours trying to access water or pay a single taka for it.



It is the women who are tasked with bearing the brunt of the drinking water crisis.

Where water comes with a cost

In the coastal areas of Bangladesh, namely Sathkhira, not only is drinking water scarce, it also comes at a much higher cost, than anywhere else in the country.

The government has pledged under goal six of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) to achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all by 2030 (section 6.1). Just a decade away from meeting the goal, equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water remains a far cry.

Since drinking water is so scarce in the south-west region and often comes at a price, many locals refuse to use this precious water for any other purpose than drinking.

With the threats of climate change-induced salinity intrusion and shrimp cultivation, freshwater sources are rapidly shrinking in Sathkhira. The water in the ponds and rivers are saline. Left with no other option, locals have to use saline water for sanitation and other purposes (showering, cleaning, laundry) which puts them at risk of skin diseases.

There are also people who cannot afford to buy clean water and have to resort to drinking arsenic, iron or manganese containing water from the tube-wells putting them at risk of high blood pressure.

Higher salinity also means fishing as a source of income is nullified, so is the promise of a good harvest. This means most of these people have no scope to improve their living standards.

This drinking water crisis has exacerbated in the decades since the eighties, when the reserve drinking water ponds constructed during the British era were polluted by saline water due to shrimp cultivation, which gained popularity around that time, says Islam of Uttaran.

Is there a way out?

In terms of coming up with solutions, locals and experts believe a detailed hydro-topological study of the area is required.

"The government cannot use the same set of tools that it uses for other areas to ensure water supply here. A newer technology or maybe a more multi-pronged approach could be the answer," says Islam.

Officials at the Department of Public Health and Engineering (DPHE) say they have been working to solve this crisis since its inception in 1936. So why have their efforts not seen fruition?

"You see, the geological condition in this area is unlike any other place in Bangladesh. We are trying our best to ensure at least one deep tube-well for every 10 families," says Aminul.

But even if deep tube-wells are established, the water they spew out is not of drinkable quality. This water is then treated through various treatment plants but that increases the cost of the water.

"The government has taken up a scheme to dig up 73 freshwater ponds, to ensure a supply of water for the locals. The work is being done by DPHE and these ponds will be handed over by July 2019," says Aminul. These ponds are much like the British era ponds we talked about earlier, the very ones that got polluted because of rampant shrimp cultivation and salinity intrusion in the area.

Experts and locals both believe the onus of the task to ensure clean drinking water lies with the government. NGOs or short projects are not the answer to this crisis, because they run on a project to project basis and the water scarcity issue in this region requires long-term planning and work. Especially, now, as the threat of climate change looms closer.

According to a study by the World Bank, river and groundwater salinity is predicted to dramatically increase by 2050 owing to climate change. This will exacerbate shortages of drinking water and irrigation in the southwest coastal areas of Bangladesh, adversely affecting the livelihoods of at least 2.9 million poor people in a region where 2.5 million people are already struggling with a lack of water.

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