‘Climate finance needs to be demand-driven, not designed in donor capitals’

Christina Chan, *senior director of climate hub at BRAC and former managing director and senior advisor for adaptation and resilience at the US Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Climate Change, talks to* **Sifat Afrin Shams** *of* **The Daily Star** *about climate finance, adaptation projects and resilience at the grassroots.*

Having worked both within and outside the US government, what, according to you, are the most tangible and immediate effects of US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on the Global South, including Bangladesh?

Having worked on climate under both President Obama and President Biden, I saw first-hand how damaging the previous (2017) US withdrawal from the Paris Agreement was, especially for countries like Bangladesh. Under Obama, we worked hard to build trust with developing countries to land the Paris Agreement. When the Trump administration pulled out, it sent a deeply troubling message: that a top emitter was walking away from a crisis it helped cause. That fractured momentum and gave cover for other big emitters to delay or weaken their commitments. The impact on climate finance was immediate.

A second (2025) US withdrawal is even more damaging. It sends a disastrous signal to the rest of the world: that the US is not serious about cutting emissions or living up to its obligations. Even before withdrawal would take effect, developing countries are already feeling the cut-off of critical assistance, including for climate change adaptation.

What are the biggest barriers to getting climate finance to the local level, where it is most needed, and how can local organisations and NGOs help to bridge that gap?

Money often doesn't make it to the communities that need it most. And from my experience, there are a few major reasons why.

First, the funding systems themselves are incredibly complex. Many of the big international climate funds—like the Green Climate Fund—have long, technical application processes that require very specific institutional capacity. That creates a huge barrier for organisations that are doing real, on-the-ground work but don't have teams of grant writers or compliance officers. Moreover, the money often flows through multiple layers—big development banks, international NGOs, national governments—which can dilute the funding or delay its arrival. Some donors are still hesitant to fund local actors directly because they see them as risky or too small to manage large grants.

Second, a lot of climate finance still comes with strings attached—projects are designed from the top down, based on what donors think will work, rather than what communities actually need. And the funding cycles are often too short. Adaptation isn't a one-year project—it's a long-term process that requires trust, flexibility, and ongoing support.

Organisations like BRAC, with deep roots in the communities it serves and an understanding of both the development context and the language of donors, can act as a bridge, helping local actors build the capacity they need to access funds, while also advocating upstream to donors to simplify their processes and shift more control to the local level.

How does BRAC's approach to climate action address the disproportionate impact on women and girls, and what more needs to be done?

Women are at the centre of our approach to climate change adaptation. Women play a critical role in the agricultural workforce and they are disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. They are also agents of change. Among male and female farmers, I have met with since joining BRAC a year ago, women farmers expressed being more likely to trust scientific advice, adopt new crops and collaborate. Evidence also suggests that when women have equal access to information and resources, "their likelihood of adopting improved agricultural practices can match or exceed that of men."

Through our work on climate change adaptation, we are promoting collaborative approaches between men and women to

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address inequalities and exclusion and to create more respectful and inclusive gender relations. Beyond selecting women as participants, we seek to examine and confront structures, processes and relationships of power and intersectionality that contribute to their climate vulnerability.

Could you share some examples of what you consider to be successful frugal innovations in climate adaptation?

Climate change is reshaping the world in profound ways—take coral reefs, for example. Many can no longer survive rising temperatures, as pointed out by former Maldivian President Mohammad Nasheed in his keynote speech at the Frugal Innovation Forum (FIF) last month. In places like Bangladesh, increasing salinity is changing what crops can be grown where. This means we can't just keep doing things the old way. We have to rethink what we grow, where we grow it, and how we grow it—and that calls for innovation.

Innovation, however, is not necessarily about high-tech or expensive solutions. In fact, as underscored at the FIF, the most effective climate adaptation often comes from communities themselves, who know their environment intimately. When communities are in the driver's seat, co-designing solutions with development organisations or researchers, what emerges is often frugal innovation—smart, practical approaches that carefully use limited resources and money, yet have a big impact at scale.

Several examples were highlighted at the FIF last month. One is the promotion of sunflowers as a salt-tolerant crop in coastal Bangladesh. Sunflowers can thrive in saline soils where traditional crops struggle, providing farmers with a viable alternative that doesn't require expensive inputs. Another example is the use of simple solar-powered water pumps that provide reliable irrigation without costly fuel, helping farmers adapt to unpredictable rainfall patterns.

Looking ahead, what is your greatest hope for the future trajectory of climate resilience in the Global South?

My hope for climate resilience in the Global South is rooted in the urgent need to make adaptation a top global priority, especially for the communities facing the most severe climate risks.

We need to dramatically scale up investments in adaptation to protect lives, livelihoods, and development progress. We must embrace transformative adaptation, which goes beyond simply coping with climate impacts to fundamentally reshaping systems and structures that create vulnerability in the first place. This means addressing underlying social, economic, and political inequalities and building resilience in ways that foster equity, justice, and long-term sustainability.

Central to this approach is ensuring that adaptation efforts are inclusive and equitable. That means centring the voices of women, indigenous peoples, and marginalised communities to ensure the benefits reach those who are often left behind.

Ultimately, adaptation must be proactive and integrated, driven by reliable data and designed with, not for, local communities.

How can the international community ensure that climate finance truly serves the principles of equity and responsibility?

The question is about more money, as well as how the money flows, who it reaches, and who gets to shape the decisions.

We must centre the needs of the communities most affected by climate change—those who contributed the least to the problem. That includes Small Island Developing States, Least Developed Countries, and places like Bangladesh that are on the frontlines. Climate finance needs to be demand-driven, not designed in donor capitals. Too often, funding is built around what global institutions think is bankable or scalable, rather than what local communities actually need to build resilience.

We need to shift the balance toward grants and adaptation finance. Too much of the money still comes as loans, and a disproportionate amount still goes to mitigation in middle-income countries. That might be where the big emissions cuts are, but it's not where the most urgent human need is.

I have heard time and again from partners in the Global South: the systems for accessing climate finance are too slow, too bureaucratic, and too skewed in favour of big institutions. If we want to make finance more equitable, we have to reform access. That means streamlining processes, rethinking how we assess risk, and building the capacity of local actors.

And finally, accountability matters. We need transparency around where the money goes, who benefits, and whether it's reaching marginalised groups and advancing gender equity. That means involving communities in governance, building stronger local feedback loops, and holding both donors and recipients to shared goals.

When the Rohingya crisis becomes an opportunity for some

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Nearly eight years into exile, the wounds of the Rohingya people remain raw, bleeding silently in the margins of a distracted world. More than a million Rohingya refugees continue to live in limbo, scattered across camps in Bangladesh and beyond, with no clear path home, no recognition of citizenship, and no justice for the atrocities committed against them. In this prolonged state of dispossession and despair, a new and unsettling pattern has taken root: for some in the Rohingya diaspora, the crisis has become not just a cause but a career.

What began as a desperate cry for help has, in some quarters, become a pathway to power. Organisations have sprung up, declarations are made, Zoom calls are conducted, and grants are secured. But behind the polished websites and international conferences lies a haunting question: what has changed for those still trapped behind barbed wire in Cox's Bazar?

There is no denying that the Rohingya crisis is one of the gravest tragedies of our time. Following decades of systemic marginalisation, including the 1982 Citizenship Law that stripped Rohingya of legal status, and brutal military operations such as Operation Dragon King (1977) and the 2017 clearance campaign, over a million Rohingya were violently expelled from Myanmar. Despite the passage of time, they remain stateless and voiceless.

While the Myanmar junta escalates its war on ethnic minorities and the world shifts its attention to Ukraine, Gaza, Israel, Syria, and Sudan, the Rohingya suffering continues in near-total neglect. Camps have become sprawling slums, rife with violence, drug trafficking, gender-based abuse, and depression. There is no right to work, no real education, no freedom of movement, and little hope.

Yet in the vacuum of progress, a parallel reality has emerged: a new class of diaspora activists, NGO projects, international speakers, and self-declared representatives now speak on behalf of the Rohingya people. They appear at summits, publish op-eds, and secure fellowships. Some hold advisory positions in the National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG), direct civil society forums, or work as policy consultants in Western think tanks.

'More than a million Rohingya refugees continue to live in limbo, scattered across camps in Bangladesh and beyond, with no clear path home.' FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Diaspora voices are important. But the problem is one of authenticity, accountability, and impact. What too often emerges is not leadership rooted in community, but performance tailored for international consumption. Instead of lifting their people, some have learned how to profit from their pain.

In Cox's Bazar, most refugees have never heard of the diaspora organisations speaking in their name. There is no democratic process of selection, no grassroots mandate. Many in the diaspora have assumed roles of authority based on English fluency, networking skills, and donor access, not lived experience or genuine connection to the communities they claim to lead.

This phenomenon is not unique. In the Syrian, Palestinian, and Afghan diasporas, similar patterns have emerged: trauma becomes a commodity, tragedy becomes a tool, and suffering becomes a platform. As Palestinian academic Hanan Ashrawi once warned, "You cannot commodify your struggle." And yet, in the Rohingya context, commodification is well underway.

In many cases, diaspora activists are quick to criticise those who speak out from the camps. They dismiss dissent as "divisive" and genuine local leaders as "uninformed." Meetings are held in Geneva and New York without ever consulting those in Teknaf or Kutupalong. Stories shared are often from 2017 or before, because many are no longer connected to the evolving horrors on the ground.

The hypocrisy is evident. When Myanmar's military commits atrocities, or when Rohingya in camps are harassed by locals, many diaspora leaders fall silent. But when a young refugee misspeaks, or when internal camp politics become messy, they are quick to post condemnations. Calling out the real oppressors may threaten donor relationships or diplomatic standing; criticising the vulnerable is safe and performative.

Many Rohingya in exile now hold multiple titles—serving as "adviser," "coordinator," "founder," and "spokesperson" in overlapping NGOs. Some attend more conferences than community visits. A few boast of being in seven to 10 organisations simultaneously. They are more loyal to their social media bios than to the liberation of their people. Meanwhile, the reality in Arakan worsens, and those in the camps remain in generational limbo.

What is lost in this spectacle is the essence of the Rohingya struggle. This is not just a refugee crisis—it is a struggle for identity, dignity, and justice. The denial of "Rohingya" as a legitimate ethnic group is not semantics; it is genocide by erasure. The junta continues to refer to Rohingya as "illegal Bengali migrants," and even the most celebrated democratic forces like Aung San Suu Kyi have refused to recognise their name; they instead defend the junta.

A heartbreaking reality is how fear, trauma, and a lack of direction have shaped youth in the refugee camps. Many educated Rohingya spend their lives teaching in community centres, managing small NGOs, or posting on Facebook—yet rarely take tangible steps toward change. Some blame leaders, some retreat into apathy, and others remain paralysed by the weight of generational oppression.

But silence is not safety; it is slow suicide. Waiting endlessly for the diaspora or the international community to act is a luxury the Rohingya can no longer afford. We must shift from expectation to action, from storytelling to strategy.

There is a quiet betrayal happening, a betrayal from within. Some Rohingya have used their people's pain to build platforms, apply for grants, and create careers. They speak of liberation, but fear discomfort. They champion justice, but avoid risk. They build brands, not bridges. Theirs is an activism of résumés and press photos, not of sacrifice and solidarity.

As Nelson Mandela once said, "Where globalisation means, as it so often does, that the rich and powerful now have new means to further enrich and empower themselves... we have a responsibility to protest in the name of universal freedom." That protest must also be against those who co-opt liberation movements for personal gain.

This is not a rejection of the diaspora; it is a demand for ethical leadership. We need transparent, community-based advocacy; inclusion of refugee voices in decision-making; ground-up strategies, not top-down agendas; a focus on citizenship, repatriation, and safety—not just visibility; and accountability for those who claim to lead.

International donors must be vigilant. The media must look beyond curated stories. And, most importantly, the Rohingya people must reclaim their struggle—from the camps, from Arakan, and, yes, even from opportunists within their own ranks.

This is not cynicism. It is a cry, of a Rohingya man who believed in Mandela, Che Guevara, Malcolm X, and thought his people had heroes too. It is a cry of betrayal, of stolen hope, of representation turned into an illusion. The Rohingya don't need saviours. They need comrades. Organisers, not opportunists. Bridges, not business cards.

We must reclaim our struggle and purify our purpose. Let that be the path forward.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Shows nervousness
6 Acting groups
11 Unescorted
12 Think up
13 Black card
14 Quite impressed
15 Frank McCourt book
16 Summer drink
18 Small worker
19 Hit letters
20 Nettle
21 Spotted
23 Flies alone
25 Bird of myth
27 Family
28 Monastery head
30 Wanes
33 Bruins legend
34 Convoy member
36 Furrow
37 Scurry
39 Drop the ball, say
40 Sweet treats
41 Visibly shocked
43 "Hello" singer
44 Jabs
45 Takes a breather
46 Garden aids

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1 Lasagna and linguine
2 Skiing variety
3 Bike features
4 Purpose
5 Appears
6 Salmon of the North Pacific
7 "- No Sunshine"
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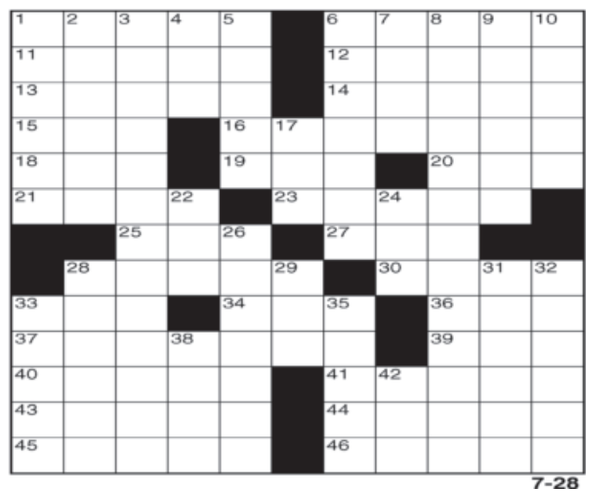
22 Cribbage jack
24 Tell tales
26 Whodunit discoveries
28 Gaming spot
29 Bind
31 Exercise with a squat thrust
32 Emphasis
33 TV grouch
35 Plot
38 Dissolve
42 Sticky gunk



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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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