

**Special feature**

# Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh: the humanitarian response

Number 73 October 2018

## Humanitarian Exchange



**HPN**  
Humanitarian  
Practice Network





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# Strengthening complementarity in the humanitarian response to the Rohingya refugee crisis

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More than 700,000 Rohingya refugees have fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar since August 2017. Together with hundreds of thousands already in Bangladesh as a result of earlier waves of displacement, the total number of Rohingya refugees in the country is now over a million. Although the Rohingya have been coming to Bangladesh for decades to escape violence and persecution in Myanmar, Bangladesh had never before experienced such a large and sudden refugee influx. At the outset of the crisis, local NGOs and host communities, in association with government departments, tried to provide support in Cox's Bazar. The UN and international and national NGOs appeared on the scene later, and while they were able to provide additional resources and capacity, some local civil society organisations (CSOs) and NGOs involved in the response feel that these counterparts have failed to acknowledge, engage and support them adequately.

This article analyses the interests and motivations of various actors involved in humanitarian action in Cox's Bazar from the

perspective of a local organisation, the Jago Nari Unnayan Sangsta (JNUS), and offers recommendations for how complementarity between local and international actors can be enhanced to improve the quality of the overall humanitarian response.

## The situation in Cox's Bazar prior to August 2017

JNUS, a community-based women-headed organisation in Cox's Bazar, has been working with Rohingya refugees since 2012, distributing relief supplies, providing medical support and conducting research in association with a number of development partners. In 2013, JNUS organised Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with Rohingya and host communities in Ukhia and Teknaf to gain a better understanding of their socio-economic conditions, safety and security and other risks and vulnerabilities. The results suggested that the relationship between Rohingya (both registered and unregistered) and host communities





Rohingya refugees raise their demands to UN Security Council delegation.  
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in these areas was antagonistic. Derogatory remarks were frequently made and negative stereotyping of the Rohingya was common, with the host community perceiving their presence as a considerable threat to their socio-economic and environmental security and a source of crime. Widespread unemployment and poverty have seen many Rohingya (and poor host community members) getting involved in drug and people trafficking in a desperate effort to earn money to meet their basic needs.

For their part, Rohingya in and outside of the camps complained about inadequate access to basic services (health, education and legal support), and being forced to work for very low wages because of a lack of legal documentation. One FGD with Rohingya women in Teknaf revealed that they suffered gender-based violence both inside and outside of the camps, and had no legal support or protection.<sup>1</sup> Despite support from the police, NGOs and legal actors, host community women were in a similar position as the incidence of gender-based violence

<sup>1</sup> According to the Refugee, Relief and Repatriation Commission (RRRC), there are 202,261 women aged between 18 to 39 and 18,690 adolescent girls among the newly arrived refugees. Despite high levels of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) documented by aid workers in the camps, the RRRC has no data on SGBV, and few women and girls have sought care at health facilities.

in Cox's Bazar was, and still is, generally much higher than in other districts in Bangladesh.

In response to public feeling, the government of Bangladesh has periodically placed restrictions on Rohingya entering the country, though these have proved ineffective in the current influx. It also used the 1946 Foreigners Act to confine the Rohingya to camps, separate from the host community. The government has not ratified the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol, leaving the Rohingya with limited legal protections, and carefully avoids using the word 'refugee', instead calling the Rohingya 'Unidentified Myanmar Nationals (UMN)'. The government also unofficially encouraged local NGOs to use this term. Government policies, documents and activities focused on repatriation rather than integration. National and international NGOs that appeared supportive of integration have been sanctioned. In August 2012, several INGOs accused of non-compliance with laws and regulations had to curtail their programmes under pressure from the government.

## The Rohingya influx in August 2017

When thousands of Rohingya refugees crossed the border into Bangladesh beginning on 25 August 2017, local people were sympathetic to their plight, and local NGOs (including JNUS) and the host community tried to provide relief alongside government efforts. Within days, however, the number of refugees had increased dramatically and relief distributions became more and more chaotic. The Bangladesh government brought in the military to manage distributions and keep order in the camps. As the number of refugees continued to rise and it became increasingly clear that the host community and the government could not cope with the situation alone, UN agencies and international and national NGOs stepped in. Meanwhile, coverage of the crisis in national and international media generated widespread sympathy and compassion across the country and internationally, forcing the government to relax the restrictions on the entry of Rohingya refugees. From mid-September Bangladesh opened its borders, allowing Rohingya in on humanitarian grounds, and stepped up efforts to bring international pressure to bear on the government of Myanmar to repatriate the refugees.

## Host community perceptions

The host community's goodwill towards the new refugees did not last long, and the fears and grievances documented by JNUS in 2013 quickly resurfaced, for a number of reasons. First, there were reports that Rohingya refugees had started taking shelter in fields meant for cultivation and in forest areas, which are the main sources of income for poorer people from Ukha and Teknaf. Second, the large-scale refugee presence was pushing up food prices on local markets. Third, local day labourers viewed the Rohingya as a threat to their income because they were willing to work for less than the market rate. Fourth, local people were angry that, instead of recruiting locally, international agencies in Cox's Bazar were employing Rohingya in manual jobs, Bangladeshis from other parts of the



country and foreign nationals for higher-level positions. Fifth, the fact that the Rohingya outnumbered locals meant that they felt their identity and property were under threat: 60% of the total population in Teknaf are Rohingya, and in Ukhiya the ratio of Rohingya to the host community is four to one.<sup>2</sup> A strict verification process requiring local people to show their voter identity cards to prove Bangladeshi citizenship has contributed to resentment within the host community.

On 23 January 2018, the Resistance Committee for the Repatriation of Rohingya Refugees, comprising host community members, staged a protest alleging that international NGOs, UN agencies and some national NGOs were encouraging the Rohingya to stay in Bangladesh by providing large amounts of resources and services and simultaneously depriving host communities of support. The Committee urged the international community to focus on the socio-economic development of local people alongside that of the Rohingya. The UN and Bangladesh government attempted to meet these demands in the 2018 Joint Response Plan, which proposed that 25% of all humanitarian assistance would be spent on the socio-economic development of the host community.<sup>3</sup> The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) are supporting local farmers through the provision of agricultural implements, seeds and power tillers. Some Rohingya who entered Bangladesh before August 2017 also felt that newer arrivals were getting preferential treatment from international humanitarian organisations.

## The UN and INGOs: mixed perceptions about complementarity in humanitarian response

UNHCR and IOM, with the government of Bangladesh, have led in coordinating the humanitarian response to the crisis. The NGO Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) is also working to improve coordination among national and international NGOs and UN bodies. The ISCG is playing a coordinating role between international NGOs and the government to address mutual priorities.

UN agencies and international NGOs have extensive global experience and expertise and the ability to mobilise resources to support the provision of services and the distribution of humanitarian assistance. Local CSOs in Cox's Bazar have, however, been critical of the ISCG, which coordinates activities across 14 sectors (health, education, wash, etc.) in the camps. All sector lead positions are held by foreign nationals, leaving CSOs and local NGOs feeling marginalised and under-represented. In response they have formed the CSO NGO Forum (CCNF), a local network to lobby for and draw attention to their demands through periodic meetings.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with government and NGO officials in Cox's Bazar.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/JP%20for%20Rohingya%20Humanitarian%20CRISIS%202018.PDF>.

The CCNF believes that international organisations in Bangladesh are failing to meet the commitments made at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit to support the localisation of humanitarian response. Local CSOs feel that UN agencies and international NGOs are not giving due consideration to the political, environmental and socio-economic conditions of the local community when responding to the humanitarian needs of refugees in the camps. These issues have been raised with the NGO Bureau, the government regulatory body overseeing local NGOs receiving foreign funds, and other government agencies.<sup>4</sup> Although the government subsequently requested that UN agencies and international NGOs partner with local NGOs in the design and implementation of humanitarian activities, this has not been strictly enforced.

In April and May, JNUS interviewed several UN and INGO representatives working in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. Interviewees noted that the capacity of local organisations to undertake humanitarian activities under international criteria, norms and standards was variable. They emphasised their focus on trying to ensure a rapid and high-quality response, while simultaneously cooperating and building partnerships with and the capacity of local NGOs. These divergent views have created a barrier to promoting complementarity in the humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar.

## Recommendations

1. It is important to continue to support host communities alongside Rohingya refugees. Efforts should be made to communicate the types of support being offered to host communities to ensure that communities and local NGOs are aware of the support being provided, and ease the tensions between host and refugee communities. National and international stakeholders should develop a strategy to support dialogue and community engagement between host communities and refugees.
2. Complementarity between local and international actors must be recognised and strengthened. For example, while local organisations have good understanding of the local context and host community and can implement programmes cost-effectively, international actors bring expertise, resources and technical capacity. The strengths of a wide range of different stakeholders are needed to forge an effective response at the scale needed. Potential avenues to explore include more equitable representation at coordination and planning meetings, capacity strengthening of local organisations and longer-term funding and partnerships.

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<sup>4</sup> 'We Demand Full Government Control, Localization and Accountability in Rohingya Relief Work', CCNF, 9 November 2017.