

PRACTICE PAPER: COMMUNITY-DRIVEN APPROACHES TO RESEARCH IN CONTEXTS OF PROTRACTED CRISIS

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Recognizing that members of affected populations are central to the development of insights for analyzing the impacts of conflict, local research within the Cross-Border Conflict: Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) program is specifically rooted in community-driven approaches. This generates an understanding of critical issues that is grounded in the perspectives of those who experience them first-hand. Since 2019, the Centre for Peace and Justice, Brac University (CPJ) and The Asia Foundation, partners within XCEPT, collaborated on a series of research initiatives focused on Rohingya populations living in refugee camps in Bangladesh. This paper summarizes the research methodologies and approaches developed, and the lessons that have surfaced over the course of these activities, which can be usefully applied to research work in similar contexts elsewhere.



RESEARCH CONTEXT

- **Target respondents:** Rohingya residing in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.
- **Engagement objectives:** To inform decision-making by humanitarians, governments, donors, and camp authorities in Cox's Bazar; and to contribute more broadly to the UK government's global understanding of the ways in which people in borderland areas around the world are affected by conflict.
- **Access challenges:** Access to the Rohingya camps is restricted by barbed-wire fencing. Researchers' entry and movement within the camps requires government permission.
- **Methodological challenges:** Researchers navigate a conservative social environment, where women traditionally remain inside their homes. They are also discouraged from interacting with males who are not relatives. This poses challenges to achieving gender-balanced sampling.
- **Representation barriers:** Youth, women, and other marginalized groups tend to be excluded from community decision-making, and may face negative consequences if they voice divergent views from those considered the most authoritative. This requires researchers to work with discretion when consulting the views of different demographic groups.
- **Trust gap:** Many camp residents have been engaged by numerous researchers, but rarely learn of findings after data collection. They complain that their recommendations and requests are not taken up and that camp conditions never improve despite extensive research. This drives a general trust gap between respondents and researchers.

Since 2019, The Asia Foundation and CPJ have collaborated as partners in the XCEPT program, an initiative funded by UK Aid to improve global understanding of political, economic and social dynamics in conflict-affected borderlands. Research commissioned in this program supports more effective policymaking and programming in borderland regions that experience conflict, and emphasizes partnerships with researchers and research institutions based in regions that they study.

The Asia Foundation and CPJ partner on the conceptualization and development of research, collaborating with Rohingya refugee research volunteers (referred to hereafter as "volunteers") from Myanmar living in camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Although displaced Rohingya are not permitted to hold formal employment in Bangladesh, those who work on projects supporting the humanitarian response receive a stipend from the organizations who engage them.

The inclusion of volunteers from camp communities is critical to the development of large sets of robust quantitative and qualitative data, producing richer and more granular insights than would be possible otherwise. The frankness facilitated by interactions between researchers and respondents from the same community strengthens the veracity and credibility of findings.

CPJ works long-term with many volunteers, enabling them to gain experience and research skills across multiple projects.

These relationships also allow research projects to integrate stronger feedback loops into the data interpretation and analysis processes whereby informants can comment on the validity of conclusions.

Together, The Asia Foundation, CPJ, and the volunteers have developed a set of approaches for carrying out research in highly challenging contexts, on topics that are difficult to study, or that tend to be overlooked. The lessons learned by the teams about effective collaboration for local research are summarized below. These include skills building for national and local researchers, conscientious approaches to engaging with survey and interview respondents who have experienced extreme conflict-related trauma, and an emphasis on building trust and long-term collaboration with target groups in order to gather honest, detailed and critical feedback.



COMMUNITY-DRIVEN APPROACHES THROUGHOUT THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Research design:

In recent XCEPT initiatives, The Asia Foundation and CPJ have engaged volunteers and community members in the processes of designing and testing research tools.

Networking and outreach:

Community influencers have been engaged to ensure their supportiveness of projects.

Training:

Volunteers working on each initiative receive training on the theoretical underpinnings of the research, research ethics, specific tools and technical skills, and “soft skills” needed for building trust with respondents.

Implementation:

Researchers are able to communicate openly with respondents from within their own communities, and help respondents feel comfortable sharing their views. Mentorship and “refresher” trainings are conducted throughout the data collection phase for further skills development and troubleshooting.

Consolidation:

Volunteers conduct the first level of summarizing and analyzing data, providing their own insights on key findings, demographic variability, and nuanced interpretations.

Dissemination:

Volunteers review draft reports, gather community feedback by providing verbal summaries in their own language, and are engaged in the process of revising and finalizing written materials. They have also helped disseminate audio summaries of reports and documented community reactions and additional feedback.



METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

During the Covid-19 pandemic, The Asia Foundation and CPJ's research teams developed three mechanisms that enabled the collection of qualitative data on community perceptions, needs and priorities. Given access restrictions and other challenges arising during this period, specific techniques were needed to ensure that research was able to continue in a responsive way that maintained the feedback loop with the affected community.

1 Trust Networks:

Volunteers applied convenience sampling methods and sourced respondents from within their own networks of trusted individuals, who were identified through a mapping process. Over 3,000 individuals were included in the Trust Network mapping, and the volunteers each contacted around 30 people per month. Though disadvantageous in terms of representing some demographic categories, the Trust Network sampling approach had the value of enabling a more discrete collection of sensitive, frank and nuanced views than is usually possible to collect at random, given trust gaps that often exist between community members and external researchers. Volunteers gained respondents' trust as they interacted numerous times, typically with people they were already acquainted with.

2 Chat Hours:

Each week, remote Chat Hours were hosted by research staff for an informal discussion of the volunteers' recent findings. The Chat Hours were conducted mainly by WhatsApp and through text messaging, which helped overcome restricted internet connection. Volunteers were able to reflect on and share their findings with staff as well as with guests from humanitarian agencies, who frequently joined to consult the volunteers' views on focal research topics.

3 Pod system:

Whereas the Chat Hours provided a space for volunteers to summarize their findings, staff also supported them to contribute to the data analysis and report preparation process. Volunteers met in small “pods” of five or six people each week to share and interpret their respective findings on particular themes or issues. Each pod submitted an analysis worksheet to staff, who integrated these contributions into research reports. Volunteers reviewed draft reports, gathered community reactions to findings by providing verbal summaries in their own language, and helped revise and finalize written materials. They also helped disseminate audio summaries of reports and documented community reactions and additional feedback.

Example: Sharing information back to support community understanding and responsiveness to Covid-19

Volunteers submitted many questions from Trust Network members seeking information about Covid-19 and clarification on rumors circulating about the virus, whether a vaccine or cure existed, and whether Rohingya would be able to get vaccinated. Early in the pandemic, rumors and concerns arose throughout the community about the treatment of patients in isolation centers. In response, CPJ arranged for a group of volunteers to visit one of these centers. They later reported details of their visit to their Trust Network members, which helped assuage concerns. On several occasions, CPJ arranged for the volunteers to communicate with WHO and health NGO officials, who answered frequently asked questions about the virus.



KEY PROJECT LEARNING OUTCOMES

Takeaway #1: *Volunteers benefit from more robust and immersive training opportunities.*

The research preparation stage provides an opportunity for volunteers from the affected community to acquire knowledge and build skills that might normally be inaccessible. Familiarity with the study's objectives, context and thematic areas of focus builds greater understanding of the purpose of data collection exercises. Many volunteers in the Rohingya camps have been denied higher education access and thus have not been exposed to the scientific method and other underpinnings of Western research epistemologies. These are not usually discussed in enumeration training that focuses solely on operational procedure. Organizational and communication skills are transferable for future employment in a range of sectors, and volunteers have discussed applying new skills to spearhead their own research initiatives, particularly in ways that contribute toward long-term solutions to the Rohingya crisis.

Takeaway #2: *Trust and familiarity between respondents and researchers requires long-term engagement.*

Repeated contact between research volunteers and respondents also builds institutional reputability and acceptance as respondents develop awareness of the purpose, limitations and potential impacts of research. With this trust established, more frank and nuanced feedback can be collected, allowing greater insight into the topics of inquiry.

Takeaway #3: *Two-way exchange between volunteers and respondents enhances the learning process and uncovers areas for further inquiry.*

Research is often a one-directional process in which those collecting data have little accountability to volunteers and respondents. To avoid this construct, researchers invite respondents to submit questions on topics of their interest to volunteers who work with CPJ to provide answers, establishing a two-way learning process. By engaging with a researcher to share views as well as ask questions, respondents have the opportunity to gain knowledge about topics on which they might normally lack access to information. This method also contributes to increased trust and equity in the researcher-respondent relationship.

Takeaway #4: *Community-driven and participatory analysis processes deliver higher quality research outputs and outcomes.*

When given opportunities to contribute to data analysis, volunteers play a central role in examining nuances and weaving narratives in ways that outsiders cannot. For example, they typically have the best handle on why different demographic groups would answer a question differently.

Takeaway #5: *Community-driven research and knowledge generation can help foster community dialogue and uplift marginalized voices.*

Research in conflict and humanitarian settings is often limited to processes of filling the knowledge gaps of those who make decisions and formulate policy and funding strategies.

CPJ has found that integrating a skill-building component can instigate critical reflection and foster community dialogue on issues and solutions. As they analyze data and discuss findings, research volunteers and respondents may become aware of shared challenges that are under-discussed.

For example, as a result of feedback collection about social justice issues faced by women in the camps, volunteers became aware that many people opposed the dowry system but felt powerless to address the problems associated with it. This prompted engagement with CBO allies, who led discussions in communities and advocated for reform.

Community-driven research also has the potential to open channels of expression for those whose voices are rarely heard. Many Trust Network members expressed to volunteers that their participation in the research process felt cathartic, as it enabled them to raise their voices and attain greater ownership over stories and narratives. Research activities that explore cultural values, traditions and heritage enable participants to magnify positive aspects of their lives in ways that break down stigma and anti-refugee biases.



TOWARD GENDER-BALANCED TRUST NETWORKS

Many research activities in the Rohingya camps seek to engage women and adolescent girls through door-to-door visits and interview arrangements such that require them to leave their shelters. This can be difficult for mothers of young children and is sometimes seen as a violation of the cultural importance placed on women's modesty. This is especially true when activities are conducted by male researchers.

Under the Trust Network approach, female volunteers target mainly women and adolescent girls, many of whom have said that the phone-based approach was their first opportunity to provide inputs and feedback into research activities. The inclusion of female volunteers in research teams is key for achieving a gender-balanced respondent pool, as they are well positioned to engage other females as respondents. Using this approach, The Asia Foundation and CPJ reached 1,380 female respondents within the 3,000-member Trust Network. Virtual and phone-based techniques can also be deployed to engage other typically marginalized groups, such as elders, people with disabilities, and people from socioeconomic groups that tend to be excluded from consultative processes.



LINKING TO LOCALIZATION

The participatory approaches outlined above indicate the potential for humanitarian research to become locally driven in ways that mirror the call for localized humanitarian action. The localization agenda, outlined under the Grand Bargain, forged at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, established a set of targets for the restructuring of aid financing and the reallocation of funding, decision-making, and power away from international agencies into the hands of local and national organizations.

These targets were designed to reform traditional aid structures, often criticized as top-down and insufficiently informed by community-level perspectives. Localization recognizes that affected populations know their own needs and priorities, and that local responders should be empowered to address them. One way to contribute to this aim is through the localization of research design and implementation.

The “complementarity” principle of localization entails the involvement of both local and international stakeholders throughout programming. Rohingya in Bangladesh cannot register NGOs or receive donor funding directly, which affects their ability to participate in the localization process. Community-centric research constitutes an opportunity for camp residents to drive the generation of knowledge about issues affecting their lives. Rather than playing a role as external “experts” or “analysts,” XCEPT project staff mainly serve in a mentorship role and help open spaces for community perspectives to be amplified by integrating them into project outputs.

The potential for localization principles to extend into the humanitarian research sector merits further exploration. As The Asia Foundation and CPJ’s experiences show, participatory approaches are possible even in severely restricted environments, such as during a pandemic or in crisis settings.



CONTINUING TO LEARN AND APPLY LESSONS

The research partnership between The Asia Foundation and CPJ produced a series of outputs focusing on the experiences of refugees in Cox’s Bazar between 2018-2021. In the first initiative, *Mitigating Hardship with Mobility*, researchers conducted over 1,600 household surveys and 50 in-depth key informant interviews. It explored Rohingya families’ decision-making around transnational mobility, the security implications and effects of policy decisions on cross-border movement, remittances and access to Rohingya communities abroad. The second initiative, *Bridging Humanitarian and Community Responses to Covid-19*, focused specifically on the impacts of the pandemic, deploying a number of innovative methods for remote data collection to get around access challenges. All publications from these initiatives can be found [here](#).

The Asia Foundation and CPJ plan to partner on future research for further examination of certain themes that emerged during previous projects, particularly those gleaned from open-ended feedback collection activities in which respondents raise their own priorities. By offering space for camp residents to voice their own concerns and needs, the research team is able to better understand their priorities and design responsive research that further compiles and analyzes their views.

Other research organizations are encouraged to consider the lessons learnt and summarized here, and to contact The Asia Foundation and CPJ to share their own tips and takeaways.



GUIDANCE FOR OTHERS CONDUCTING COMMUNITY-CENTERED RESEARCH IN COX’S BAZAR

- 1 Prioritize the experiences, roles, and interpretation of members of the affected population at each stage of the research.
- 2 Collaborate with community research volunteers on a long-term basis to build skills incrementally.
- 3 Be honest, direct and clear about the purpose, goals, potential benefits and limitations of the research in order to ensure community understanding and respondents’ ability to provide informed consent.
- 4 Ensure that an appropriate mechanism is in place for troubleshooting and quick adaptation.
- 5 Build trust with community members and influencers on an ongoing basis.
- 6 Incorporate the localization principles of complementarity and participation.
- 7 Think creatively about communication tools and methods to maintain regular contact with respondents and ensure inclusivity, despite contextual challenges.



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