VIEWS OF ROHINGYA REFUGEES:
ENGAGEMENT AND EXPERIENCES WITH HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES IN COX'S BAZAR, BANGLADESH

This policy brief, a joint publication by Centre for Peace and Justice, Brac University (CPJ) and The Asia Foundation, conveys findings from a rapid analysis to understand refugees' perspectives on community engagement and consultation approaches by the humanitarian agencies delivering services and aid in the camps of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The study's themes and the research questions were designed by CPJ's Rohingya research team in response to frequent community concerns, and all viewpoints expressed here are those of camp residents. As an academic institution and knowledge partner serving the humanitarian response, CPJ aims to help diverse stakeholders understand each other's perspectives.

KEY FINDINGS

- Camp residents interact with humanitarian staff in various settings such as health clinics, rations distribution queues, and in awareness-raising sessions. The opportunity to attend training and awareness-raising sessions has been received positively by community members, who say they want more opportunities to learn **skills for building livelihoods and community development**. While vocational skills and formal education are the top requests for learning services, people also want training on humanitarian, community development and human rights topics.

- Respondents said that **humanitarian consultation and community feedback mechanisms should be strengthened**. Three-quarters of respondents said that NGOs do not consult with the community enough before designing projects. Half of respondents had submitted a complaint or question to a humanitarian agency through a community feedback mechanism; of these, 53 percent said they received a reply, and only 56 percent of this group (30 percent of total complainants) were satisfied with the reply they received.

- Respondents spoke of a **trust gap** between refugees and humanitarians. This is created partly due to negative experiences and interactions, but exacerbated by limited information sharing about how programs are designed, lack of explanations by agencies about their efforts to be responsive to community inputs, and the complexity of explaining the financial and policy reasons behind service gaps. The trust gap is also influenced by limited interpersonal communication between refugees and humanitarians. Low levels of interaction mean that trust-building opportunities are infrequent.

- Refugees living across the 34 camps have **diverse experiences engaging with and receiving services from specific agencies and sectors**. Rohingya have no representation in sector coordination activities, so their perceptions of the different sectors are formed in an ad hoc manner based largely on personal experiences.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES AND DONORS

- **Ensure meaningful and inclusive participation in project design and evaluation:** Respondents urged NGOs to listen to refugees directly in order to understand their challenges and priorities. Consultation should include measures to ensure inclusive representation. Communication and information sharing processes are needed to explain how community inputs are accounted for in decisions and program design. Monitoring and evaluation processes should measure community satisfaction and responsiveness to community priorities in addition to other indicators.

  In the medium and long-term, the development needs of refugees must be addressed in tandem with humanitarian imperatives. Supporting the Rohingya community's own development objectives will present agencies with new opportunities to ensure the inclusion of diverse refugee representatives in decision-making.

- **Build trust to ensure honest feedback:** "Courtesy bias" and other research challenges often arise during evaluative and consultative processes. Refugees may avoid confiding negative and sensitive perceptions to unknown and non-Rohingya surveyors, could cause offense or make them seem ungrateful to their Bangladeshi hosts. Many experienced Rohingya enumerators live in the camps and know how to uncover honest feedback.

- **Provide truthful and personal replies to feedback:** Trust grows not only when complaints and grievances are resolved, but when honest replies are provided. This is true even for unsolvable problems. Many respondents said they feel respected when they receive a reply and explanation about an issue even when it cannot be solved, but feel disrespected when ignored. Direct relationship building between humanitarians and refugees and qualitative analysis are important complements to community feedback mechanisms that focus on quantitative data and statistical analysis.

- **Increase training and skills building opportunities:** Camp residents are interested in learning about a wide array of topics. Humanitarian and development actors can demonstrate accountability and responsiveness to the affected population by heeding requests for expanded access to non-formal learning.

- **Ensure that staff communicate appropriately:** One of the main impediments to building trust between humanitarians and Rohingya is refugees' fear of being spoken to in an unfriendly, authoritative way. "Please treat us like human beings" is one of the most common recommendations received by CPJ from refugees across demographic groups. Agencies should ensure that all non-Rohingya staff and volunteers have been oriented on humanitarian principles, conflict sensitivity, and trauma-informed communication. Staff who interface directly with refugees should receive "soft skills" training to work with an approachable, compassionate stance. Communication in Rohingya language is also seen as dignifying. Agencies should engage Rohingya as volunteers in research, enumeration and community engagement roles to address the language issue and to build trust.

A woman returns to her shelter with rations distributed by a humanitarian agency.

INTRODUCTION

Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh camps are entirely dependent on material aid and other humanitarian services. Aid and services are delivered by local, national and international NGOs and humanitarian agencies who receive UN and other donor funding. Most NGO staff are Bangladeshi, though foreigners work in the response as well. Rohingya refugees are not permitted to engage in formal employment in Bangladesh, so they do not hold staff positions in these NGOs. A percentage serve the humanitarian response as NGO volunteers, for which they are given a small stipend. Some host community members from areas adjacent to the camps serve as stipended volunteers as well.

Together, these staff and volunteers undertake one of the world's largest refugee responses. Since the 2017 influx of over 700,000 Rohingya, the Government of Bangladesh has taken a short-term approach to managing the crisis due to its interest in seeing the Rohingya repatriate to Myanmar promptly. This approach determines the types of programming NGOs can undertake, and they have been required thus far to focus on emergency and basic service provision (such as food rations, healthcare, and camp infrastructure) rather than on refugees' medium and long-term needs, such as community development, livelihoods, and education.

Humanitarians provide services and engage refugees in this context in ways that differ by organization. Globally, many agencies have recognized the importance of adhering to Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) guidelines, which aim to ensure that agencies are responsive to those who receive services. In 2012, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) put forth a set of global AAP core guidelines, and many UN agencies and NGOs have since adapted their own AAP frameworks. Inter-agency Communications with Communities working groups now operate in many emergency response settings to help put these guidelines into practice and track progress.[1]

According to the IASC, the key pillars of AAP include 1) integration of AAP in institutional governance and leadership, 2) transparent provision of information to affected populations, 3) the collection of feedback, 4) participation of affected populations in decision-making, and 5) involvement of affected peoples in program design, monitoring and evaluation.[2] Most organizations working in the camps of Cox's Bazar collect community feedback and address the other AAP pillars in their work. But the reduced physical presence of humanitarians in the camps during the Covid-19 pandemic has meant less face-to-face interaction between refugees and humanitarians. This has hindered progress toward AAP goals, and existing AAP weaknesses have been exacerbated.[3]

From May 2020 to March 2021, Centre for Peace and Justice, Brac University (CPJ) implemented a community feedback and research initiative looking at camp conditions during the pandemic era, *Bridging community and humanitarian responses to Covid-19 in Rohingya camps*. This paper summarizes the perceptions shared by respondents with CPJ about AAP, and highlights their recommendations on how to improve accountability for better humanitarian outcomes.

Methodology

During each week of the *Bridging community and humanitarian responses to Covid-19 in Rohingya camps* project, CPJ's 40-member team of Rohingya research volunteers invited camp residents in their personal "Trust Networks" (including neighbors, villagers, relatives, civil society members, religious leaders, teachers, and NGO volunteers) to confidentially share feedback, concerns, and questions. Each month, the Rohingya research volunteers conducted a rapid analysis on a specific research topic by inviting their Trust Network members to submit feedback.

The February 2021 rapid analysis sought to understand respondents' experiences and perceptions of the community engagement and consultation approaches of humanitarian agencies, building on CPJ's previous discussions with camp residents about these topics. The research volunteers also collected community members' recommendations about how concerns should be addressed, and considered how perceptions of these issues vary amongst different gender, age and socioeconomic groups.

CPJ's goal in using this purposive sampling approach was to broach sensitive topics that people may not be comfortable commenting on through traditional or randomized approaches to sampling, where respondents may not trust unknown enumerators sufficiently to disclose dissatisfaction. The findings in this paper should not be considered representative of the entire camp population, as some of the sampled groups tend to have higher socioeconomic status, educational attainment and income in comparison to the overall camp population. Trends indicated in these findings could be unpacked further by humanitarian research teams.

The analysis was carried out in thirteen of the 34 camps in which Rohingya refugees reside in the Cox's Bazar District. Research activities included:

- Two **WhatsApp Chat Hour** sessions in which 40 volunteers engaged in live discussion with NGO representatives and CPJ's research team and shared their findings on camp residents' perceptions of the community engagement and consultation approaches of humanitarian agencies.

- **Phone-based community consultations** conducted by CPJ Rohingya volunteers, who spoke to 1,158 trusted individuals to share their perspectives on the approaches of humanitarian agencies to community engagement and consultation approaches.

  This group included 55 percent male and 45 percent female respondents. Most respondents were classified as neighbors and villagers (26 percent), members of camp-based civil society organizations (24 percent), teachers and NGO volunteers (22 percent), majhis and camp management volunteers (16 percent), and religious leaders (12 percent).

PERSPECTIVES ON TRAININGS AND AWARENESS RAISING SESSIONS

In addition to the direct provision of material aid, some humanitarian agencies offer training and awareness-raising programs to camp residents on basic health and other topics. For many refugees, their most personal interactions with humanitarians have taken place in these informal learning spaces. Many respondents spoke positively about the training they had been able to access in the camps, and said they were appreciative of the opportunity to learn new things. They said that training had prompted them to make behavioral changes and adopt new perspectives, particularly on social issues like domestic violence and child marriage.

One challenge is that the skills imparted through training often cannot be practiced due to lack of resources and job opportunities. For example, many agencies have taught the importance of hand-washing, but people sometimes lack sufficient soap and water to wash hands frequently. Respondents also noted that Bengali, Chittagonian and English are often used for instruction and interaction during training, a barrier to participation for the majority of people who speak Rohingya only.

While many people have not had any access to training, others have attended many, and said they were ready for more advanced and interesting topics. There is high demand for vocational training that would help improve access to livelihoods and income, seen as the key to reducing harmful behaviors and coping mechanisms. A common perspective is that other social problems "would automatically disappear" with expanded access to training and livelihoods.

Statement from CPJ volunteers:
"According to our research, most NGO volunteers and block leaders have attended many kinds of training and awareness sessions held by humanitarian agencies. But often, uneducated people and laborers haven't participated in any sort of training or awareness session."

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"Most people in the camp have received health education, but other training topics and education are needed."

"We refugees have learned many things and gotten different sorts of knowledge from training by NGOs. It has really changed us, if we compare ourselves before and now. We changed many things about ourselves, in our families and in society after receiving effective training."

What types of training and awareness raising sessions have you attended since arriving in camp?

- Handwashing, hygiene, sanitation
- Disease prevention
- Covid-19 prevention
- Sexual and reproductive health
- Culture, crafts, tailoring, arts
- Drug addiction
- Domestic violence
- Child marriage

- Disaster management, emergency preparedness, fire safety
- Child protection
- Human trafficking
- Peace building, social cohesion
- Human rights, social justice
- Women's empowerment

Camp infrastructure has rapidly developed since the large influx of Rohingya refugees arrived in 2017 due to the efforts of UN agencies and NGOs. Moving forward, camp residents say they would like a greater role in decision-making within the humanitarian response.

While respondents' formal education requests were not discussed during the study, they were asked which non-academic topics they would be interested in learning about from NGOs. The most popular requests pertained to long-term needs faced collectively by the Rohingya, but which may not be in the purview of traditional humanitarian services, such as governance, social sciences, civic studies, and Burmese and Rohingya history. These requests indicate interest in training topics focused on longer-term needs. There were also many requests for vocational training and skills-building opportunities that address community development needs, such as leadership, community management, and civic engagement. People also want training for interpersonal communication and life skills, recognizing that these would help uplift and heal their community.

Regarding the accessibility of existing training opportunities, respondents said that humanitarians should take more time to select participants in an inclusive manner. Selection tends to be rushed, and mainly more educated people participate because they are better connected to humanitarian agencies. Laborers, shopkeepers, farmers, and elders tend to be left out.

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"If we can develop cohesion, respect, kindness and understanding, it will be very easy to change the community...But now, few camp youth are gaining knowledge in any type of learning environment. Because of this, they are becoming unstable, making bad decisions, and committing social ills. We are pleading with NGOs and CiCs to create a healthy environment by giving training to people on all different topics."

"We need developmental training, especially on life skills, vocational skills, entrepreneurship, shopkeeping, and business management."

OPPORTUNITIES AND BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION IN CONSULTATIVE PROCESSES

When asked to share their experiences of participating in consultative and project planning processes organized by agencies, many respondents shared that they had never heard of this type of consultation. Over three-quarters of respondents did not feel that NGOs consult adequately with the community prior to designing programs (figure 1).

When consultation does occur, women and girls are the most excluded, due to conservative gender norms and community power dynamics. *Majhi*, block-level aid distribution captains, are the first point of engagement for many humanitarian teams.[4] Nearly all *majhi* are men, and were appointed by the Bangladesh Army. The prominence of *majhi* in humanitarian engagement means that women have fewer opportunities to influence decisions. Because the *majhi* system does not reflect traditional leadership structures, their elevated role in community oversight and decision-making is a point of contention amongst camp residents.

Many respondents also observed that laborers and other underrepresented groups including persons with disabilities, youth and older people are rarely invited to participate. Excluded groups need special consideration, but, as with training, consultation groups are often assembled quickly with inadequate attention to inclusiveness.

A common view amongst respondents was that insufficient consultation leads to unsatisfactory humanitarian services. Many stated that aid outcomes would automatically improve if agencies listened more intently to refugees and designed programming based on their inputs. In reality, community feedback is part of a constellation of influences, and while community priorities should remain at the heart of program design, transparent communication about other limiting factors would be helpful. After utilizing community feedback to make decisions, agencies could build trust by sharing details with camp residents about how their inputs were incorporated.

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"All we want is to be involved in NGOs' decision-making, then there won't be any gaps in the services we get."

"NGOs need to understand our communities' views; then they can work perfectly for us. So they should consult with us before designing their projects."

"NGOs and community leaders think that disabled and old people are worthless, that the young are unwise, and that women are unwelcome to participate in any crucial decision-making."

Yes	
24%	
No	
76%	

Figure 1: Do you think agencies consult with the community enough before designing their projects? (*n = 1,152*)

EXPERIENCES WITH COMMUNITY FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

When asked whether they had ever submitted feedback, a question or a complaint to an agency, 50 percent of respondents said they had done so (figure 2). One of the main barriers mentioned amongst those who had not complained was not knowing which agencies are responsible for which services in their camp, which makes it difficult to pursue the appropriate process for filing a complaint. This impacts the potential for civic participation and empowerment as people are unclear about the complex web of services and policies affecting their lives.

Amongst those who had submitted feedback, questions and complaints, just over half said they had received a reply (figure 3). Amongst them, just over half were satisfied with the agency's response (figure 4). Overall, 30 percent of surveyed complainants both received a reply and were satisfied with that reply. Reasons for dissatisfaction include unpleasant interactions with staff, perceived lack of effort by agencies to fix problems, and delays in response time.
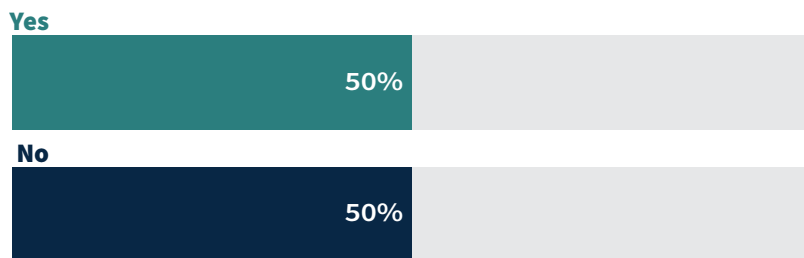
Yes

50%

No

50%

Figure 2: Have you ever shared feedback, a question, or a complaint to a humanitarian agency? (*n = 1,160*)

Yes

53%

No

47%
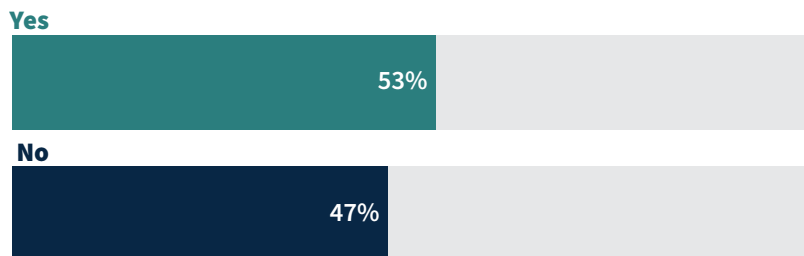
Figure 3: If you submitted a complaint or feedback, did you receive a reply? *n = 582*)
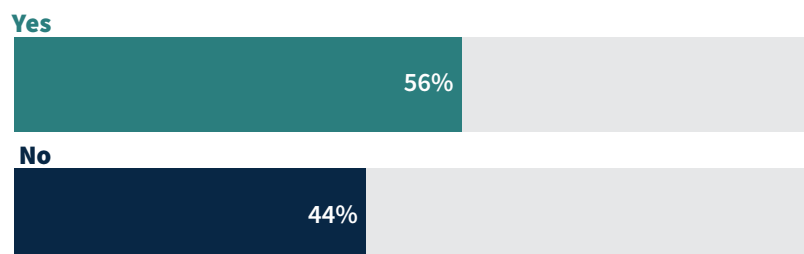
Yes

56%

No

44%

Figure 4: If you received a reply, were you satisfied with that reply? (*n = 307*)

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"We didn't get any outcomes after providing feedback. We never get the solutions we need. That's why we aren't satisfied with humanitarians."

"A few NGOs are collecting our concerns, feedback and questions. We are not given responses by most agencies, but we are satisfied with the agencies who do give us answers."

"Many humanitarian agencies collect our concerns and challenges; however, they just disappear after and we don't see changes in services. We are now reluctant to share our difficulties with anyone."

Those who received a reply said they would be more likely to contact that agency again. Refugees are entirely dependent on humanitarian services, and a lack of responsiveness causes anxiety and frustration that exacerbates their sense of vulnerability. It also contributes to a loss of trust in those mandated to protect and support the population, with reverberating impacts as people become less likely to confide serious problems.

Agencies may analyze and use feedback in planning processes without responding directly to those who submit it, but camp residents have no information about whether or how this takes place. To help overcome the sense that most feedback is ignored, agencies could provide general explanations about how feedback mechanisms operate, and why it is not always possible to reply directly to each individual complaint.

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"We share our feelings, concerns, feedback and questions with an expectation that we will be given answers and that the responsible platform will take action according to our complaints. But we haven't seen any changes."

EXAMINING THE TRUST GAP

Many respondents voiced frustrations about the inability of the UN and international community to help resolve the root crises of displacement and conflict in Myanmar, affecting their trust in ways that filter to the camp level: some respondents bluntly asked the researchers if the UN and humanitarian sector were satisfied with maintaining the political status quo.[5]

But camp residents' day-to-day and direct experiences with humanitarian staff have the greatest impact on trust, both positively and negatively. Trust is greatly impeded when humanitarian staff and volunteers communicate with refugees in an insensitive manner; for example, with indifference to a person's status within his or her own community, or when a distribution queue monitor hits people with sticks during crowd control. One person described his horror seeing a distribution queue monitor hitting an esteemed elder with a stick during crowd control. Many respondents said they fear such abusive behaviour, and want humanitarians to engage in a softer and more polite tone, as such interactions would be rehabilitative and dignifying. Across respondent groups, one of the most common recommendations was for humanitarians to "please treat us like human beings," revealing a desire for greater attention to dignity.[6]

Petty corruption amongst humanitarians and the *majhi* with whom they most frequently interface at the community level is widely reported, further feeding mistrust. People observe the close working relationship between camp authorities and humanitarians at the site management level and CiC's office, and are hesitant to pursue support from either. Some respondents shared their experiences of being extorted for bribes by lower-level government staff in exchange for services, and said that many refugees have been arrested for failure to pay these bribes. They feel that victims' complaints are too often taken lightly by camp management agencies and government authorities alike. Some respondents blamed petty corruption on a lack of effective monitoring by the responsible officials and donors, saying this paves the way for humanitarians in the camps to misuse their power.

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"Every NGO is working in their own way, but we Rohingya don't even understand what they are doing. We don't know what they are working for in the camps, we just see them riding around in their AC cars."

"NGOs should communicate equally with us like they do with the host community: without any discrimination, peacefully and politely. Because the Rohingya community has been suffering from many kinds of problems for many decades, there is always frustration in the camps. So NGOs should be patient even if someone mistakenly does something wrong."

"We, the Rohingya, should be communicated with as human beings. NGO volunteers and staff should be well trained in order to communicate more effectively with Rohingya."

PERSPECTIVES ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF DIFFERENT SECTORS

Humanitarian services are organized by sector under the coordination of the UN Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG), with different UN agencies mandated to oversee each sector along with NGO partners.[7] The agencies that provide services within each sector meet for coordination purposes on a monthly basis or more frequently. Rohingya refugees have no representation in these sector meetings. Rather, the sector system has become known to the community in an ad hoc manner over time. Many contrasting opinions were voiced about the effectiveness of different sectors, indicative of the diversity of needs, experiences and access to services amongst camp residents. Some sectors were not mentioned by any respondents, possibly indicating a lack of familiarity rather than a neutral view.

CPJ has observed some lack of clarity when camp residents describe the work of different sectors. For example, people discuss protection and security interchangeably, ascribing responsibility to the protection sector for both when the Government of Bangladesh is in fact the main security actor. Also, people often attribute blame to humanitarians even when their concerns (such as those related to education and livelihoods) are the domain of government policy. There was also limited awareness of the funding challenges faced by agencies, and service gaps are seen as willful rather than unavoidable due to lack of resources. Sharing more information with refugees about the sector system and humanitarian financing would be advantageous for trust building.

> "NGOs are working very heartily in the camps, but they have had no impact for the past three years. This is because they rarely consult with the Rohingya community or take their opinions. When there have been consultations, the NGOs don't develop their activities according to the findings from these consultations, even though they are working for Rohingya. Most problems with services in the camps are happening due to this."

> "NGOs are following their own rules and complying with their regional staff. They don't really know what is happening in the camps. Everyone knows that there are many things happening here because of their carelessness. They are just pretending that they are working for us, but if we look at the reality of the camps, nothing changes and problems are just increasing every day."

Mothers and their babies wait in line to receive supplemental foods such as high-energy cereals from a nutrition center for children that is run by a humanitarian agency in the camps.

CONCLUSION

Three and a half years after the exodus of over 700,000 Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to Bangladesh in 2017, medium and long-term strategies are needed to ensure that the basic rights and dignity of displaced Rohingya are upheld. Bangladesh lacks a national policy framework to delineate the rights and responsibilities of refugees, and has thus far regarded the displacement crisis as a short-term emergency. This scenario has given rise to various gaps with regard to camp governance, access to justice, and accountability. Policy-based solutions crafted by Bangladeshi authorities and humanitarian actors are ultimately needed to guide the comprehensive management of the crisis. In the meantime, humanitarian actors can already uplift Rohingyas' sense of dignity and inclusion by adhering to AAP principles.

This is taking place to an extent, and much progress has been made since the early days of the response. The feedback expressed by refugees indicates some room for improvement. Humanitarians must approach programming and community engagement with an awareness of existing trust gaps, and can work to overcome them by demonstrating and explaining the ways in which they are accountable to Rohingya. This can be achieved through community participation in decision-making, greater and more direct responsiveness to feedback, complaints, and questions; and warm, honest, and personal interaction between humanitarians and refugees.

ENDNOTES

1. See IASC Task Force on Accountability to Affected People (2012). IASC Task Force on Accountability to Affected Populations. (Co-Chaired by WFP and World Vision International.) https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-task-force-on-accountability-to-affected-people-closed#:~:text=The%20five%20commitments%20are%201,)%20design%2C%20monitoring%20and%20evaluation

2. IASC (2012)

3. Regarding previously identified AAP gaps, a 2018 study by Internews found that 93 percent of NGOs in Cox's Bazar collected community feedback; however, not all of them shared information back to the community based on that feedback, and only 23 percent had SOPs in place for how feedback should be handled. See Aelbers, S., Fluck, V. and Rahaman, J. (2018) Humanitarian Feedback Mechanisms in the Rohingya Response. Internews, June. https://internews.org/resource/humanitarian-feedback-mechanisms-rohingya-response-coxs-bazar-bangladesh. Also see Barter, D. and Fluck, V. (2019) "Jumping hurdles: key barriers to community feedback mechanisms." February, Humanitarian Practice Network. https://odihpn.org/magazine/jumping-hurdles-key-barriers-community-feedback-mechanisms/

4. *Majhi* are neighborhood block captains, nearly all male, who were selected and tasked by the Bangladesh Army to assist with aid distribution and other activities.

5. See Aron, G. and Wade, F. (2021) "Western powers' empty rhetoric is making things worse for the Myanmar people." The Guardian, February 27. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/feb/27/myanmar-western-powers-protesters-military-coup

6. Overseas Development Institute has conducted ongoing analysis on the topic of dignity for Rohingya refugees. See Holloway, K. and Fan, L. (2018) Dignity and the displaced Rohingya in Bangladesh. Overseas Development Institute. https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12362.pdf Also see Wake, C., Barbelet, V., and Skinner, M. (2019) Rohingya refugees' perspectives on their displacement in Bangladesh. Overseas Development Institute. https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12719.pdf

7. See https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/bangladesh for a list and information about each sector. In other humanitarian contexts, sectors are often known as "clusters."

THE X-BORDER LOCAL RESEARCH NETWORK
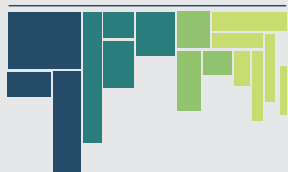
In Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, conflict and instability endure in contested border regions where local tensions connect with regional and global dynamics. With the establishment of the X-Border Local Research Network, The Asia Foundation, the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, the Rift Valley Institute, and their local research partners are working together to improve our understanding of political, economic, and social dynamics in the conflict-affected borderlands of Asia, the Middle East, and the Horn of Africa and the flows of people, goods, and ideas that connect them. This five-year program, initiated in 2018, produces research to inform more effective policymaking and programming. It builds, maintains, and expands local research networks in some of the most remote and difficult conflict-affected regions. Finally, it supports improvements in local research methods and capacity.

The X-Border Local Research Network is a component of the Cross-Border Conflict: Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) project, and is supported by UK aid from the UK government.