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Localisation requires trust: an interface perspective on the Rohingya response in Bangladesh

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Local actors are promoted as important agents in the humanitarian sector's latest reform efforts. Opinions on the exact meaning and the best means of implementing localisation differ, however. Applying an interface perspective, this paper analyses how the Rohingya response in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, became an arena of contestation, competition, and sometimes convergence among different actors in relation to localisation. It shows how misconceptions and divergent understandings of localisation and the best methods of achieving it were prevalent and hampered the joint endeavours of international and local humanitarian bodies. Although both sides sought common ground, conflicting views, interests, and perceptions of 'self' and 'other' stood in the way. A lack of trust between international and local organisations intensified divisions. The paper argues, therefore, that the humanitarian sector needs to engage in trust-building between the various entities involved in humanitarian response if localisation is to be realised, including addressing underlying structural and systemic issues of (neo)colonialism, racism, and classism.

Keywords: Bangladesh, humanitarian action, local non-governmental organisations, localisation, Rohingya response, trust

Introduction

Localisation has become a key concept in the humanitarian sector, impelling changes in funding practices, partnership models, and organisational structures to make the humanitarian response more efficient, effective, and emancipatory. Through commitments enshrined in international documents such as the Grand Bargain[1] or the Charter for Change[2] of 2016, the humanitarian sector is seeking to put local actors and the affected population at the centre of a more contextualised and sustainable humanitarian response (Gibbons et al., 2020). It is hoped that greater participation in the planning and implementation of the humanitarian response will mitigate the unequal power relations prevalent in the humanitarian sector, whereby a handful of international actors continue to dominate and determine the allocation of funds and aid priorities.

Taking stock of progress in the implementation of localisation, it becomes evident that the humanitarian sector has not lived up to its commitments so far (Van Brabant and Patel, 2018, p. 8). This may be attributed to a number of factors. Apart from resistance to relinquishing power and money, localisation requires systematic

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change in the humanitarian sector and the ways in which humanitarian organisations operate—something that is bound not to happen overnight (Gingerich and Cohen, 2015; Harris and Tuladhar, 2019). What complicates matters further is that varying definitions of localisation circulate in the humanitarian sector, and it seems to be far from clear what localisation actually means and how it should be implemented. As Van Brabant and Patel (2018, p. 6) note, 'the key challenge for successful localisation is to know what "localisation" means in practice'. Empirical studies of localisation as an inherently contested process may shed some light on the opportunities afforded and on the obstacles to realisation of the humanitarian sector's localisation agenda (Pincock, Betts, and Easton-Calabria, 2021).

This is not only an abstract issue in the international discourse, but also a matter that becomes tangible in specific humanitarian arenas where conflicting ideas on the very meaning of localisation emerge when different humanitarian actors meet and negotiate the humanitarian response (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010). As socially constructed sites in which contests over issues, resources, values, and representations take place (Long, 2001), these arenas become 'battlefields of knowledge' (Long and Long, 1992) in which actors and their understandings, interests, and values are pitched against each other (Long and Jinlong, 2009). The Rohingya response in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, constitutes such a humanitarian arena in which conflict over differing understandings of localisation has surfaced. Faced with continuing migration of Rohingya from neighbouring Myanmar, Cox's Bazar has become the site of a large-scale international humanitarian response—a peak was reached in August 2017 when almost one million people fled persecution and violence in their home state of Rakhine. Described by many as a 'second influx', referring to the arrival of large numbers of international humanitarian entities, the Rohingya response also represents one of the first major interventions since the humanitarian sector committed itself in 2016 to work 'as local as possible, as international as necessary' (Barbelet, 2018).

Based on original qualitative empirical research conducted in Bangladesh in February and March 2019, this paper illustrates how localisation became a contentious issue in this particular humanitarian arena. The findings are based on 20 semi-structured interviews with representatives of local organisations and on six semi-structured interviews with representatives of international counterparts. Moreover, numerous informal meetings, discussions, a focus-group discussion, and visits to Camps in Teknaf and Ukhyia yielded additional insights.[3] The data were subsequently transcribed and coded using MAXQDA software to achieve better organisation and facilitate systematic analysis.[4] The findings were then triangulated with available official data, newspaper articles, and reports by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Following a constructivist-interpretive methodology that 'rests on the belief in the existence of (potentially) multiple, intersubjectively constructed "truths" about social, political, cultural, and other human events' (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, p. 4), and employing an interface analysis (Long 1999), the research was guided by interest in the encounters of international and local humanitarian actors in the context of the Rohingya response in Bangladesh against the backdrop of the localisation agenda.

The focus was thus on the perceptions of local NGOs (LNGOs) of the humanitarian response, as these were generally considered to be 'the local' humanitarian actors in this particular setting.

The research reveals how divergent interpretations of localisation emerged in Cox's Bazar, challenging dominant discourses and practices prevalent in the humanitarian sector. Moreover, it demonstrates how constructions of the 'self' and the 'other' emerged in the context of localisation, with attempts to legitimise and delegitimise certain actors or their ways of working. 'Being local' became a resource in a competitive humanitarian arena in which the different entities were working against each other. The study also discovered that below the surface was deep-seated mistrust between the different actors, amplified by the separated spaces they inhabited. The paper concludes, therefore, that to give localisation meaning and to implement it in humanitarian practice, the humanitarian sector needs to turn its attention to trust-building between the different actors and invest in the fostering of positive relationships between them. This also requires addressing underlying structural and systemic issues of (neo)colonialism, racism, and classism. Only then will constructive negotiations in the humanitarian arena be possible, allowing for a much-needed shared vision of the humanitarian response that is as local as possible, and as international as necessary, to materialise.

The Rohingya response and the localisation of humanitarian action

In August 2017, almost one million Rohingya fled to neighbouring Bangladesh to escape persecution, systematic discrimination, violence, and the reprisals of the Myanmar Army. The United Nations (UN) and human rights experts speak of a 'textbook example of ethnic cleansing', which is now being investigated by the International Criminal Court (UN, 2017; BBC, 2020). This was, however, only the latest episode of massive displacement since the country's independence from Great Britain in 1948. Already in 1962, 1978, and 1991–92, thousands of Rohingya had fled across the border to Bangladesh and sought shelter in camps in the country's southwest region of Cox's Bazar (Wake and Bryant, 2018, p. 3). Others fled to countries such as India, Malaysia, Thailand, and even Australia by land and sea. Although boat migration continues as of this writing (summer 2020) (Shirak, 2020), it was in 2015 that the Rohingya made the headlines as boat refugees when they drifted for weeks in the Andaman Sea after trafficking networks were destroyed and those responsible arrested (Amnesty International, 2015, p. 7; UNHCR, 2015; Chaudhury and Samaddar, 2018).

The dire humanitarian situation in Cox's Bazar has its origin in the violent conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State, on the border with Bangladesh. Considered the most persecuted minority in the world by the UN (UNHCR, 2022), the predominantly Muslim Rohingya differ both religiously and linguistically from the majority

Buddhist population in Rakhine and the rest of the country. Intercommunal violence, the ongoing conflict with the government, and burgeoning Buddhist nationalism nationwide have contributed to the continuing expulsion of the Rohingya from Myanmar (Leider, 2015; Burke, 2016; Cheesman, 2017; Prasse-Freeman, 2017; Ware and Laoutides, 2018). The situation has worsened dramatically in recent years due to further military offensives, especially in the northern part of Rakhine State. Violence escalated again in August 2017 when the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army—a Rohingya group founded in 2016—launched attacks on police posts in northern Rakhine. The counteroffensive of the army and the police, as well as continued intercommunal violence, drove around 700,000 Rohingya out of the country within two months (International Crisis Group, 2017). Today, approximately 1.5 million of the estimated two million Rohingya live in exile, about one million of them in camps in Cox's Bazar, currently the largest refugee settlement in the world (Wake and Bryant, 2018).[5]

The humanitarian response in Bangladesh

Faced with the high number of Rohingya entering the country, first the local population of Cox's Bazar and later the Government of Bangladesh expressed solidarity and initiated various forms of help (Lewis, 2019). In what could be best described as everyday humanitarianism (Richey, 2018) or citizen aid (Fechter and Schwittay, 2019), ordinary people, local businesses, and civil society actors responded spontaneously to the needs of the Rohingya, offering food, shelter, and money. Soon, volunteers and organisations from other parts of the country arrived to lend their assistance (Lewis, 2019). After some weeks, the government took control of the unfolding humanitarian situation and the humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar. In reaction to earlier arrivals of Rohingya, the government had already developed a National Strategy on Myanmar Refugees and Undocumented Myanmar Nationals in 2013. This now underpinned the basis of its National Task Force (NTF) in charge of the response (Lewis, 2019). Despite their longstanding presence in the country in general, and in Cox's Bazar in particular, the UN and international organisations had to renegotiate their role in the response, accompanied by inter-agency discord over mandates and responsibilities. Humanitarian activities are now coordinated by the Strategic Executive Group (SEG) in Dhaka, a body that is chaired by the Resident Coordinator, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and the United Nations Refugees Agency (UNHCR).[6] At the district level, the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) works under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief and is responsible for issuing permissions to organisations wishing to work in the camps (see RRRC, 2018). Within this structural set-up, the District Commissioner is responsible for the operations among the affected host community, while a Senior Coordinator directs the humanitarian response on behalf of the humanitarian agencies (Farzana, 2017, p. 149; Lewis, 2019, p. 1890)[7]. Thereby, the government follows a temporary policy and approach to the response with the ultimate goal to repatriate the Rohingya as soon as possible (Farzana, 2017). This manifests itself in various ways: for example, it introduced the Forcibly Displaced Citizens of Myanmar (FDCM) term to avoid the official refugee label and the rights that come with it (Lewis, 2019).[8] Moreover, the policy not to teach Bangla in the camp schools or allow Rohingya to work is geared towards preventing their long-term integration into Bangladeshi society (International Crisis Group, 2019).[9] Increasingly, the Rohingya are framed as a security threat, leading to strict security measures in the management of the camps, including an internet blackout (Hölzl, 2020) and the construction of barbed-wire fencing (Rahman Rabbi, 2020).

When high numbers of people started arriving in August 2017, only five UN agencies and a handful of international NGOs (INGOs) were present and responded to the situation. The international response was quickly scaled up, however. The government sought international support to meet the growing humanitarian needs of the Rohingya who settled in official and unofficial camps in Cox's Bazar. In early 2018, the number had risen to 12 UN agencies and more than 120 international and national NGOs working on the Rohingya response (Buchanan-Smith and Islam, 2018; Wake and Bryant, 2018, p. 7). Lewis (2019, p. 1891) observes:

> *As the government, the army and the agencies took control of the situation, the humanitarian arena was transformed into a more tightly governed and ordered refugee space. Tensions emerged not only within the different levels of the formal response (for example between international and local NGOs, religious and secular agendas, and government and non-state actors) but also with local responses.*

Localisation thus soon emerged as a critical issue, with representatives of Cox's Bazar's civil society becoming vocal in their demands for a more localised response (Wake and Bryant, 2018; Barbelet, 2019).

Localising the Rohingya response

The importance of local actors has long been acknowledged in the humanitarian sector, but the push for localisation grew strong during the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, Turkey, in May 2016. As a result, donors and INGOs signed agreements and made commitments to localise humanitarian action. The main pledges revolve around issues such as a fairer distribution of funds, the strengthening of local capacities, and more equitable forms of partnership (Van Brabant and Patel, 2018). Yet, the exact meaning of localisation and the best ways of implementing it remained vague (Wall and Hedlund, 2016; Fabre, 2017; HLA, 2019). Moreover, in the international discourse on localisation that ensued, the 'local' label was used in reference to a variety of actors, ranging from national and local authorities to civil society organisations at the national and community level to the affected population itself. It is far from clear, therefore, who these local actors are that should profit from the localisation agenda, but a strong focus on LNGOs as key players can be observed. This spotlight on LNGOs is not only apparent in a number of documents, reports, and studies by humanitarian organisations, but more so in the ways in which localisation is implemented in practice (Roepstorff, 2020). This may be because they are commonly among the first responders to sudden-onset disasters (Zyck and Krebs, 2015) and are organised, registered entities that operate over a longer period of time, thus making them more reliable partners than ad hoc volunteer groups or social movements. These LNGOs form part of local civil society, deeply entrenched in the politics and social fabric of the particular locality.

In the specific context of Bangladesh, the vibrant civil society is characterised by longstanding traditions of citizen action, resistance, and social movements (Khan and Rahman, 2007; Quadir, 2015; Lewis, 2019). Indeed, LNGOs were among the first to respond to the needs of the Rohingya in August 2017. Although religion plays a powerful role in civil society action and is an important factor in understanding the national and international humanitarian assistance supplied to the predominantly Muslim Rohingya, national narratives of displacement, persecution, and the freedom struggle also inform acts of help in Bangladesh (Lewis, 2019).[10] Today, numerous LNGOs continue their work in Cox's Bazar alongside an ever-more structured and formal response by the government and international actors.[11] Being confronted with a massive 'influx' of international actors, the LNGOs soon organised to fight jointly for their interests and to make their voices heard. In so doing, being local became an important resource and legitimising reason for their engagement in the Rohingya response and localisation became a contentious issue in Cox's Bazar.

Localisation as a bone of contention: an interface perspective

Based on original data gathered during six weeks of field research in February and March 2019 in Dhaka and Cox's Bazar, this paper employs an interface analysis to understand better the encounters between international and local entities in this particular humanitarian arena and in light of the localisation agenda. Developed by the British sociologist and social anthropologist Norman Long, the interface approach focuses on how encounters between actors with different perspectives, experiences, and worldviews are shaped by unequal power relations (Gerharz, 2018).[12] These actors are active stakeholders with specific knowledge, resources, and scope of action, as well as ideas regarding self, others, and context (Long, 1999; Gerharz, 2018). However, their interests and views are manifold and struggles over authority, status, reputation, and resources are informed by the extent to which they see themselves as capable of manoeuvring within particular settings, responding with resistance, accommodation, or compliance in their everyday actions (Scott, 1985; Long, 1999). The interface perspective lends itself, therefore, to the analysis of localisation as a contentious issue in humanitarian settings. Such an analysis can reveal how the different players through their discursive practices and in their encounters perpetuate, use, manipulate, and transform dominant discourses (Long, 2001) and how networks develop between individuals or organisations that lead to the emergence of standardised modes of relating to non-members and outsiders (Long, 1999), shedding light on social differentiation and conflict among different actors in the humanitarian arena (Chiweshe and Bhatasara, 2016).

Applying the interface perspective to the Rohingya response in Cox's Bazar in general, and the issue of localisation in particular, two main themes emerged: (i) the juxtaposition of self and other and respective identity constructions to legitimise one's own actions and to delegitimise those of others; and (ii) divergent interpretations of localisation to challenge dominant discourses and the practices of the humanitarian sector. Both were mainly informed by specific interests, the relative position of power and competition pertaining to resources,[13] and reputation. However, at a deeper level, what appeared as a main issue at the interface was the lack of trust between the different actors, which seriously hampered the effectiveness of the humanitarian response and the realisation of localisation.

Who is the local: perceptions of self and other in Cox's Bazar

One of the key questions that arises in relation to localisation is who should be considered as local. An array of definitions of local can be found in the discourse on localisation (Wall and Hedlund, 2016; Els, 2018, p. 3). Different opinions exist, for instance, regarding the inclusion of internationally affiliated local organisations such as national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, local branches of INGOs, the private sector, individual volunteers, diaspora organisations, or the local staff of UN agencies and INGOs (Roepstorff, 2019; Wall and Hedlund, 2016; Apthorpe and Borton, 2019; Barbelet, 2019). Another question that arises concerns to what extent there should be a differentiation between national and local actors, with the latter often being equated with the affected population. This is particularly debatable in forced migration contexts, where local humanitarian actors to a large degree represent the host rather than the displaced community—as was the case in Cox's Bazar. Moreover, some entities may view themselves as more local in comparison to others.

Being aware of the conceptual vagueness of 'the local' and its perceptual and relational nature (Roepstorff, 2019), I started my own research on localisation in the context of the Rohingya response by tracing self-identifications and ascriptions in this particular humanitarian setting. My search for the local thus started with a two-pronged scoping study of the actors in Cox's Bazar: first, and prior to the field research, I talked to staff of humanitarian organisations with whom I had contact through my own personal and professional network; and second, I scanned documents, newspaper articles, social media posts, and the internet for additional cues. As a result, I came across the Cox's Bazar CSO-NGO Forum (CCNF), a network of civil society actors with its own internet presence in English and Bangla, sharing relevant information on the Rohingya response and members of the Forum and their activities.[14] As the website states, these local and national NGOs are:

> *always fast responders to any disaster of humanitarian crises in Cox's Bazar. As usual, regarding the recent Rohingya crises in Cox's Bazar, these NGOs and CSOs have come fast with humanitarian supports. As the CSOs and NGOs working in Cox's Bazar consider the current Rohingya refugee problem as an extreme, complex and transitory problem for the people of this district, and they feel that a strong coordination is needed among the humanitarian responders, they have formed this forum.*

The promotion and implementation of localisation is mentioned as one of the principal objectives of the network. In fact, the Forum, especially some of its most active members, turned out to be very vocal in demanding their 'right to localisation'. It was natural, therefore, to start my investigation with the CCNF, but other actors, such as government officials, representatives of INGOs and UN agencies, and Rohingya people, were also included in the empirical research to gain a better understanding of localisation from an interface perspective.

Varying definitions of the local were expressed during the interviews. In most cases, these served to differentiate between the self and the other and revealed a pattern of identity construction in which the labels of the local and the international were clearly used in reference to the relative distribution of power, money, and resources. Moreover, self-identification as local seemed to occur to stress one's own legitimacy in being engaged in the Rohingya response and to delegitimise others.[15] Interestingly, an organisation was perceived as local by some, and 'accused' by others of being from outside Cox's Bazar and hence not really local. This was based on the location of the main office and whether it had been operating in Cox's Bazar before the Rohingya response of 2017. Other actors, mainly those that had their office in the capital, Dhaka, still referred to themselves as local, contending that they were operating in only a limited number of districts and not the entire country. A pattern that thus materialised in the interviews was that the label of the local was mainly applied in reference to four factors: (i) the time span that an organisation was working in Cox's Bazar; (ii) where the main office of the organisation was located; (iii) the area of operation/reach of the organisation; and (iv) from where the staff came. Moreover, in almost all interviews, being local was linked to the idea of being first responders, the first ones on the scene to help. This included the host community, which in the absence of donors, INGOs, or national NGOs shared their food, let people camp on their land, and generally welcomed the Rohingya.[16] At the same time, LNGOs emphasised their own unique role in responding to the needs of the Rohingya, setting themselves apart from other local entities or national NGOs.

Nuances came to the fore between the local and the more local. Many interview partners of LNGOs made a distinction between the local and the 'real local organisations', the 'very local', or the 'really, really local'. These attributes were used in reference to organisations that were considered as particularly small in size, with limited capacity and resources, few projects, and having their main office and origin in Teknaf or Ukhiya—the areas of Cox's Bazar where the refugee camps are located. One representative of an LNGO used the description of 'very local' in reference to an NGO from Khulna, a different part of Bangladesh, highlighting the importance of embeddedness, small size, and limited operational reach for constituting the local. That size mattered in the identification of local also became clear when one representative stressed several times that his organisation was local despite its bigger size. Consequently, the perception of a really local organisation was linked to limited power, scope, and resources. Yet, among the LNGOs, some were considered to be more powerful than others and referred to as big leaders, characterised by one study participant as 'being closer to international organisations with better access to information and funding and having publicity', along with more qualified staff. In the description of such a powerful organisation, another interviewee concluded that these were actually national organisations with a 'big presence in Cox's Bazar', demonstrating again the local being used to describe a position of limited power and size.

Generally, the relationship between the different actors seemed to be simultaneously one of competition and close cooperation to advance one's own and common interests. In what elsewhere has been depicted as 'competitive humanitarianism' (Stirrat, 2006), INGOs were under pressure to find and select suitable local partners, leading to rivalry between the different LNGOs. This found expression in the demand to distribute funds and projects more equally between the local partners. Indeed, that some organisations profited more from the funds available for the humanitarian response than others was viewed critically by many LNGOs. Contempt was expressed about how INGOs only worked with the same few organisations, which, as a result, grew in size and amassed more power—and were accused of being overwhelmed and working beyond capacity. In explaining this bias towards certain organisations, LNGO representatives pointed to their social capital, including better English-language proficiency and having earlier experience of working with international organisations and therefore better networks with which to access funding. To emphasise their own legitimacy and capacity, organisations that considered themselves as local—and hence smaller in size and with limited resources—stressed their comparative advantage over bigger or national ones. This was justified on the basis of language and cultural proximity to the affected population and a continued presence in the district, allowing for a more cost-efficient and immediate response. 'We are the pioneers in . . .', 'we were the very first ones . . .', and 'we are the only ones' were common refrains, indicating a competition between the LNGOs, which also reflected the ways in which other organisations were portrayed. Being local thus became a resource in the competition for funds, legitimacy, and prestige against the backdrop of the localisation agenda (Roepstorff, 2019). At the same time, and in spite of these differences and tensions between the different entities, a high level of cooperation existed. Not only did the different actors organise within the CCNF (although some were more active than others and views and standpoints were not uniform), smaller organisations also profited from being subcontracted by the larger ones. For some, this was the only way to work on the Rohingya response, as they often lacked the required registration with the government.[17]

The identity of being local was not only construed in contrast to national, but also of course in relation to international. At the time of the research, the relationships between local and international actors were tense, with international actors being perceived as 'VIPs' (very important persons) with a lot of money, having their offices in five-star hotels, and their presence and operation being very costly.[18] This may be linked, too, to the ways international aid workers segregated themselves, a common phenomenon in intervention contexts (Autesserre, 2014; Smirl, 2015). Owing to security risks and separating themselves in their 'expat bubble', international actors seemed to have very little social interaction with the local population and their partners (Autesserre, 2014; Roth, 2015; Schuller, 2016).

Maybe as an outcome of that, representatives of INGOs perceived their local counterparts quite critically. Reflecting the conflict that was already in full swing at the time of the research, LNGOs were believed to be spreading rumours and instigating protests against international organisations and not interested in participating in meetings to which they were invited. Moreover, INGOs struggled with the unclear mandate and wide-ranging activities of LNGOs, with some considered as being more neutral and independent of government than others. It was also thought that due to their embeddedness in the local context, LNGOs faced pressures from both the host community and government authorities, thus only having limited space for action (Roepstorff, 2020). In addition, the common argument of LNGOs' cultural proximity to the affected population was called into question. Indeed, the claimed cultural proximity to the Rohingya stood in stark contrast to many critical statements made in interviews and informal discussions during the field research in Cox's Bazar. While shared religion was often mentioned as a commonality, LNGOs or local staff of INGOs repeatedly expressed strong irritations with and disapproval of Rohingya religious and cultural practices. As Palmer (2011) notes, religion might not in fact override political, social, and cultural divisions.[19] In Cox's Bazar, where the local humanitarian actors represent simultaneously the host community, LNGOs were stakeholders in the conflicts that emerged due to the changing demographics in the region,[20] the environmental pressures because of the construction of the camps (UNDP Bangladesh and UN Women Bangladesh, Dhaka, 2018), and general problems associated with the drug trade and human trafficking (Ahmed and Mohiuddin, 2020, p. 210; see also Donovan, 2019). The conflict between the host community and the Rohingya was then also a central concern expressed by LNGOs and informed the distinct ways in which localisation was interpreted.

What was striking throughout my formal and informal discussions was that the inclusion of the Rohingya as local actors, and not only as 'beneficiaries', was not something that was considered much at all by LNGOs, or INGOs for that matter, but it is one of the core aspects of localisation, which seeks to put the affected population at the centre of the response (Wake and Bryant, 2018). This may be due to the specific context of forced migration, where local humanitarian entities do not overlap with the affected population, but also where refugee-led organisations (RLOs) are allowed to register officially as NGOs and provide humanitarian assistance—as in the case of Uganda, where they are still routinely bypassed in the humanitarian response (Pincock, Betts, and Easton-Calabria, 2021). In Cox's Bazar, where Rohingya were not officially allowed to work, they were trained as volunteers by international and local organisations. Furthermore, UNHCR encouraged political representation of the Rohingya and supported elections in the camps (*The New Humanitarian*, 2019). Official activities of Rohingya people, however, remain rather limited, although grassroots activism and self-organisation is growing among them (*The New Humanitarian*, 2018). Restrictive government policies, a general neglect of RLOs due to 'a top-down perspective on refugee governance' (Pincock, Betts, and Easton-Calabria, 2021), and the competition with local humanitarian actors that exclusively represented the host community prevented the acknowledgement of Rohingya as local humanitarian actors in the spirit of the localisation agenda—as actors in their own right that should receive direct funding for their activities. Pincock, Betts, and Easton-Calabria (2021, p. 719) argue, therefore, that localisation requires 'much more attention to the role of power and interests at the local level if RLOs are to be engaged as meaningful actors in humanitarian assistance'. Yet, refugee-led humanitarianism (Sharif, 2018) was an aspect of localisation that was not mentioned by any of the interview partners during the field research, including the Rohingya themselves.

Colliding worlds? Different perceptions and interpretations of localisation

In the interviews with LNGOs, most respondents themselves brought up the topic of localisation or mentioned the Charter for Change and the Grand Bargain—they had learned about them through workshops, internet resources, and word of mouth. LNGOs surely profited from some of their leaders having international exposure and networks; travel to Geneva, Switzerland, was mentioned several times. Some exceptionally active persons functioned as multipliers, attending international trainings and meetings, and reading the relevant documents and then sharing their knowledge of localisation with their peers. That most of the leaders of LNGOs, who were in many cases also the founders of the same organisations, had a high level of education, spoke English, and had experience of working with INGOs, might have helped in the dissemination of the information on localisation. When it came to interpretation of localisation, recurrent issues emerged, notably divergent understandings of the ways localisation was to be implemented and a major trust deficit between the different stakeholders that hampered a fruitful dialogue and a shared vision of localisation from evolving.

Representatives of LNGOs responded very similarly when discussing the details of the commitments and changes foreseen by localisation in the humanitarian sector: localisation was mainly understood as a way to channel funds and resources to Cox's Bazar's organisations and the host community. They stated that localisation was meant to bring funding to LNGOs and permit the procurement of items for the humanitarian response locally and the hiring of local staff. It was generally understood that 25 per cent of donor funds were to be channelled directly to local and national organisations. Hence, localisation was also interpreted as giving priority to local over national organisations. This was justified on the basis that national NGOs were not really local and not hiring local staff, but rather bringing personnel from other parts of Bangladesh. The same accusation was levelled at UN agencies and INGOs.[21]

Although the CCNF pushed for localisation and sought dialogue with the government, UN agencies, and INGOs to discuss ways to implement it in the Rohingya response, little progress was attested by LNGO representatives. One reason mentioned was that the international actors themselves were not clear what localisation actually meant, or, as was supposed in several interviews, were even not aware of or familiar with the concept. This seems to be a general problem: a study on localisation reveals a 'persistent lack of awareness and confusion: beyond small circles in Europe and perhaps North America and Australia, key commitments in the 2016 "Grand Bargain" . . . and the Charter for Change, are generally little known among the full spectrum of actors in aid-recipient countries' (Van Brabant and Patel, 2018, p. 4). This was also criticised by LNGOs in the context of the first Joint Response Plan, in which references to localisation were missing completely.

LNGOs further criticised the lack of conflict sensitivity among INGOs and stressed the need to work on social cohesion in the Rohingya response. A whole-of-society approach was demanded (see also Post, Landry, and Huang, 2019). This reflected different priorities in the response and a major discrepancy in the interpretation of localisation. INGOs were blamed for applying a narrow understanding of localisation, reducing it to working through implementing partners. LNGOs, meanwhile, held the view that a localised response had to involve the host community with the aim of fostering social cohesion and countering potential conflicts. They demanded, therefore, a broader understanding of localisation, as the following statement by a representative of an LNGO illustrates:

> *This is actually not true. Localisation is a vast thing. We have to think about the local community, we have to think about the local government, we have to think about the local expertise involvement, in planning, designing and also implementing.*

This resonates with current discussions on localisation, especially in displacement settings, where a whole-of-society approach is promoted so as to include the host community as a key stakeholder in shaping the humanitarian response at the local level (HLA, 2019, p. 7). That increasing attention to social cohesion is now being given in the Rohingya response could be attributed to the ways in which LNGOs succeeded in challenging dominant discourses and practices. However, as the above statement shows, the Rohingya themselves were not included as local actors in the suggested broader understanding of localisation.

Localisation was also interpreted in terms of capacity development and local ownership by LNGOs. Although the Government of Bangladesh has clearly stressed the temporary nature of the humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar and engages in negotiations with the Government of Myanmar regarding the return of Rohingya people (Farzana, 2017; Lewis, 2019, p. 1886), LNGOs doubted that this would happen soon. They openly expressed concern that international funding would decrease and international actors would leave, concentrating on other humanitarian hotspots. As one local aid worker put it:

> *when the international organisation will leave or they have no funds, who will bear the whole responsibility of Rohingya people? Obviously local government, local NGO and the host community. So we basically try to convey the message that the international organisations and UN agencies should support local NGOs for their capacity in terms of funding, their training and providing some system or technology that the international organisation have.*

Capacity development was thus deemed necessary to make the response sustainable and a fundamental aspect of localisation. Here respondents highlighted a discrepancy between their understanding of capacity and the ones used by INGOs. They criticised INGOs for defining capacity in terms of resources and the number of staff or vehicles, and for not valuing the capacity of LNGOs in terms of their in-depth awareness of the setting, proximity to the affected population, and language skills (see also Wake and Bryant, 2018). This is a dominant practice of the international aid sector, which tends to value technocratic expertise and organisational capacity over context-specific knowledge and associated capabilities (see also Autesserre, 2014; Barbelet, 2019). Yet, despite local organisations highlighting their comparative advantage, they generally acknowledged that international interveners had more capacity, technical knowledge, and experience of managing refugee camps. As most of the LNGOs were founded in the 1990s in response to the destruction caused by cyclones in the region, they had not been working in the camps before 2017 and hence expressed a strong willingness to learn from their international partners. Although capacity development trainings were being offered, the primary format of in-house training was considered ineffective by many LNGOs. It was argued that only through working jointly could capacity be developed. Staff poaching further undermined already limited capacity, something that all respondents, including some INGO representatives, cited as one of the major challenges to their organisation and capacity development.[22]

The issue of capacity development was mainly linked to adequate forms of partnership. Despite an envisioned complementarity, a number of INGOs seem to be continuing in directly implementing their projects or entering into very hierarchical partnerships.[23] Some respondents complained about INGOs directly implementing their projects, sidelining LNGOs and thus not fostering capacity development or harnessing local experience and knowledge. Where partnerships were in place, they were characterised by a clear hierarchy. Strikingly, the term partner was frequently used interchangeably with source of funding in formal and informal discussions with

LNGOs. LNGOs were acting as implementing partners of international organisations—or as intermediaries that subcontracted the 'really local' organisations, which then implemented the projects in the camps. As a consequence, LNGOs called for 'partnerships with dignity', in which the organisations would meet on the same eye level and not as 'contractor and vendor'. This also extended to being involved in the design of projects. INGOs were accused of arriving with ready-made project designs without consulting the community or LNGOs. Interestingly, one representative of a LNGO was very critical of his organisation's approach, saying that projects were designed 'in AC [air-conditioned] rooms' and just implemented by them, without consulting the local community. Having little in the way of their own funds and capacities, they felt dependent on the decisions of UN agencies or INGOs. This seemed to lead to a mirroring of the practices of INGOs. As a result, the lack of ownership was a key concern of LNGOs. Another point raised was the absence of visibility of local partners in the annual reports of INGOs. This was perceived as proof of a lack of respect for local partners, which believed that they were assuming at least half of the responsibility for the successful implementation of projects.

Unquestionably, partnerships are considered to be a key element in building local capacities in humanitarian settings (Smillie, 2001). The importance of partnering with local organisations is widely recognised in the humanitarian sector, therefore, and already well established in the Principles of Partnership (2007),[24] and next to the issue of direct funding of local actors has taken centre-stage in the localisation discourse (Barbelet, 2019). Yet, the very way partnership is understood and exercised in many intervention contexts is characterised by a dependence of local partners on their international counterparts in terms of funding, accountability, and management of projects (Smillie, 2001), something that was also criticised by LNGOs in Cox's Bazar.

It is the trust, stupid!

While the lack of implementation of more equitable partnerships—or 'partnerships with dignity'—may be for a variety of reasons, the research found that a dearth of trust on all sides hampered effective communication between the different stakeholders and was at the core of the problem (Wake and Bryant, 2018). A recent study supports this finding, stating that '[m]any examples of partnership practices which are least conducive to localisation reflect a lack of trust and respect' (Christian Aid et al., 2019, p. 5). As partnerships are in essence about relationships (Houghton, 2011), the strong 'us' versus 'them' thinking, which also involved the othering of partners and stereotypical thinking regarding 'the local' and 'the international', emerged as an underlying theme in the research (Autessere, 2014; Roth, 2015).

Intriguingly, most of the issues that LNGOs raised are addressed in the international discourse on localisation and reflected in the key commitments of the localisation agenda, yet they seem to have not been successfully translated into humanitarian practice in Cox's Bazar and elsewhere. The language and specific terms used by LNGOs showed that most of them were well aware of these commitments and the ongoing debate on localisation. In light of the perceived lack of implementation in their daily work, international actors were thus accused of not living up to their promises and commitments. Furthermore, representatives of LNGOs criticised the lack of visibility of their contribution to the response, limited participation and inclusion in project design, no access to direct funding, and partnership relations that instead of fostering capacity development were at best hierarchical in nature. In short, the response in Bangladesh replicated to a large extent the entrenched practices of the humanitarian sector, with no major changes in the ways aid was delivered or local actors becoming involved. UN agencies and INGOs were accused, therefore, of only paying lip service to localisation, with little action following.

The question arises why localisation was only partially, if at all, implemented in Cox's Bazar. Apart from the reasons often mentioned, such as the lack of willingness to yield power or share resources, a deep-rooted trust deficit on all sides was arguably a main obstacle to the realisation of localisation. This indicates the importance of trust-building efforts between the various actors if localisation is to be achieved. Indeed, trust is a key factor affecting inter-organisational cooperation and the readiness of organisations to establish collaborative relationships (Stephenson, 2005, p. 343; van Gorp, 2014, p. 624), the provision of funding by donors, and the affected population accepting humanitarian aid (Slim, 2019). As Schneiker (2020, p. 26) asserts in reference to competitive environments, trust is not the only condition for cooperation, but it is an essential one. So, it is argued here that although 'going local' may be important in addressing the trust deficit prevalent in the humanitarian sector (see Mahmood, 2020), trust is a prerequisite for going local in the first place. It seems to be a chicken and egg situation.

Different definitions and attempts to categorise trust have been suggested for different kinds of networks (Newell and Swan, 2000; Stephenson, 2005, p. 344; Searle, Nienaber, and Sitkin, 2018; Awasthy et al., 2019; Schneiker, 2020). Studies on the issue of trust in humanitarian action have focused, therefore, principally on cooperation between INGOs, donor-recipient relations, or the affected population's perceptions of humanitarian assistance. These works offer important insights for understanding the issue of trust in the context of the localisation agenda. Schneiker (2020, p. 36), for instance, finds that sharing the same identity as humanitarian actors is an important element of trust-building in the large, unstable networks that humanitarian responses normally represent. Furthermore, actors cannot base their trust on experience of past interactions. Identity-based trust, however, may easily lead to the exclusion of actors that are perceived as different, as with LNGOs and INGOs in Cox's Bazar. These studies, though, commonly do not address more structural and systemic factors that clearly feed the trust-deficit and hamper localisation: the legacies of colonialism, racism, classism, and unequal power relations prevalent in the daily interactions of people in the humanitarian arena (Katwikirize, 2020; Rejali, 2020; Steinke and Hövelmann, 2021).

Conclusion

It is in intervention contexts, such as the humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, that struggles over meanings and practices arise (Long and Jinlong, 2009). Interface analysis allows us to 'look more closely at the question of whose interpretations or models . . . prevail in given scenarios and how and why they do so' (Long, 1999, p. 19). It shows that the implementation of localisation is not simply a top-down process, 'since initiatives may come as much from below as from above' (Long, 1992, p. 19).

Although international actors had more power to shape the response, local actors used different strategies to challenge the ways in which it was carried out and localisation was implemented. The international norm of localisation thus found its way into the specific local setting: local actors are not passive recipients of a global discourse but rather, they construct their own discourse on localisation (Chiweshe and Bhatasara, 2016).

By looking at the intersecting lifeworlds of international aid workers and local humanitarian actors and applying an interface perspective, the research revealed how the Rohingya response in Cox's Bazar became a site of contestation, competition, and sometimes convergence among different actors vis-à-vis the meaning of localisation. LNGOs had developed their own vision of localisation, which did not always converge with that of international actors. The research exposed how divergent understandings of localisation and the best means of implementation prevalent in Cox's Bazar created conflict and hampered the joint efforts of international and local humanitarian actors (Mission Team, 2018; CCNF, 2019). Both sides tried to find common ground and engage in dialogue, but conflicting views, interests, and perceptions of 'self' and 'other' seemed to stand in the way of more constructive relationships.

Consequently, trust-building efforts and a respectful attitude should not only be central to the nurturing of good partnerships, but also to improving more generally the humanitarian response and making localisation a reality. This may entail, among many other things, consideration of material and spatial factors so as to foster positive relationships and social interactions with LNGOs and the host community (Autessere, 2014, p. 174; Smirl, 2015, p. 80). However, it also requires addressing more fundamental issues concerning power imbalance and the effects of (neo)colonialism, racism, and classism on the humanitarian sector and the need to decolonise humanitarian action. While the political economy and competition over funding and prestige clearly led to tensions between the different actors, the problematic relationships cannot be understood without taking into account the more systemic and structural factors that shape humanitarian action. Legacies of colonialism and experiences of racism, classism, and elitism cast shadows, not only on the practices of INGOs, but also on those of their local counterparts. Implementing localisation thus requires a more fundamental shift in current humanitarian practice, which will undoubtedly take some time to occur.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Endnotes

[1] Under the Grand Bargain, launched during the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, Turkey, in May 2016, donors and humanitarian organisations committed themselves to making the humanitarian response as local as possible, notably by channelling up to 25 per cent of funds directly to local and national actors by 2020. For more information, see https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain (last accessed on 18 February 2022).

[2] The Charter for Change is an initiative of various humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that commit to pass 25 per cent of their own funds to national and local NGOs by 2020. It demands to involve local and national partners more systemically in the development and implementation of projects and to acknowledge the efforts of local actors through better public visibility. For more information, see https://charter4change.org/ (last accessed on 18 February 2022).

[3] The research also included informal discussions with Rohingya outside and inside the camps, visits to camp hospitals and schools, and meetings with three Majhis (appointed Rohingya leaders in the camps), as well as an observation of a training of Rohingya volunteers in combating gender-based violence. Insights were only incorporated in this analysis of local civil society organisation's perceptions of the international response if they were considered to provide additional information. This is a limitation of the study, however; Rohingya views on localisation and the response of international and local organisations would paint a more complete picture.

[4] In line with research ethics, all references have been anonymised to prevent actual or potential identification of research participants.

[5] The exact number is not clear, but for some estimations see Amnesty International (2017), Alam (2019), and UNHCR (2019). See also Kolstad (2018).

[6] The SEG coordinates activities with the government and the NTF.

[7] For an overview chart, see https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/08_rohingya_refugee_response_coordination_mecha.pdf (last accessed on 21 February 2022).

[8] Bangladesh is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. However, this view was also stated in an interview with a government representative in Cox's Bazar in February 2019.

[9] Interviews with local and international aid workers, Cox's Bazar and Kutupalong Refugee Camp, March 2019. See also Human Rights Watch (2019).

[10] This was a common trope in conversations with aid workers, and with taxi drivers or colleagues at the University of Dhaka.

[11] During field research, I learned from a government representative that there were 220 NGOs listed at the beginning of the Rohingya response in August 2017. However, only a few remained active over time. Another interview partner referred to 200 INGOs operating in Cox's Bazar.

[12] Long (1993, p. 217) defines an interface as 'the critical point at which structural discontinuity is most likely to occur between different social system, areas or levels of the social order due to variable normative values and social interests'.

[13] The Rohingya response was internationally funded to the tune of USD 691,870,583 in 2019 (see UNOCHA, 2021).

[14] The CCNF describes itself as 'a network of local CSO and NGOs', although text references to local and national NGOs are to be found throughout the website. See http://www.cxb-cso-ngo.org/origin/ (last accessed on 21 February 2022).

[15] Religion also played an important role in legitimising and delegitimising certain actors, whether it was Hindu and Christian organisations accused of missionary activities in the camps, or Muslim organisations suspected of spreading extremism.

[16] One interview partner conceded, however, that the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) was one of the first responders. A number of INGOs were already present in Cox's Bazar (Wake and Bryant, 2018, p. 7) and UNHCR acted as the leader of the international relief operation and facilitated repatriation back in 1978 (Farzana, 2017, p. 72).

[17] According to Bangladesh's Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Law 2016, NGOs have to register with the NGO Affairs Bureau. For projects, NGOs need to have either FD6 (development projects) or FD7 (relief work) approval. To work on the Rohingya response, FD7 approval is required. As a subcontractor (or sub-recipient, as they were called) of a registered NGO, smaller organisations evaded this limitation.

[18] Among international actors, though, hierarchies were also observable, with UN agencies being named as the most powerful not only by LNGOs, but also by INGOs.

[19] Moreover, while helping Muslim brothers and sisters surely informed everyday humanitarianism in Cox's Bazar, the Government of Bangladesh's attempt to curtail radicalisation in the country and in the camps led to three Islamic NGOs being banned from operating in the area in 2017 (Lewis, 2019).

[20] The Rohingya make up one-third of the population in Teknaf and three-quarters of the population in Ukhiya (Wake and Bryant, 2018, p. 8).

[21] The conflict between local and international organisations then revolved around one issue: the claim that international organisations were not hiring local staff. At the time of the research, a movement in Teknaf and Ukhiya demanded the hiring of more local staff, culminating in physical attacks on the infrastructure of international organisations and threats of violence against aid workers.

[22] Skilled local staff joined UN agencies or INGOs because of the considerably higher salaries. Local organisations claimed that they felt under pressure to specify low salaries in budget proposals to

donors in order to win a competitive bidding process. This view conflicted with the assessment of an international aid worker: 'it's up to them to then look after their staff cost . . . they give me like very tiny numbers and then they complain they cannot pay. I cannot identify for you what is your salary'.

[23] See Accelerating Localisation Through Partnerships and the Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute (2020).

[24] The Global Humanitarian Platform endorsed the Principles of Partnership in 2007, laying the foundation for a shared understanding of how food partnerships contribute to a more humanitarian action. The commitments revolve around the issues of equality, transparency, a results-oriented approach, responsibility, and complementarity. For more information, see https://www.icvanetwork.org/transforming-our-network-for-impact/principles-of-partnership/#:~:text=The%20Principles%20of%20Partnership%20(Equality,and%20national%20humanitarian%20response%20capacity (last accessed on 21 February 2022).

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