A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY: PRIORITIES FOR HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM REFORM IN BANGLADESH

JANUARY 2025

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

About the research team:

Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) was founded in 2012 to elevate the profile of humanitarian action in Asia and the Pacific. Set up as a social enterprise, HAG provides a unique space for thinking, research, technical advice and training that contributes to excellence in humanitarian practice. An Australian-based ethically driven business, we combine humanitarian passion with entrepreneurial agility to think and do things differently.

Note that a Bangladesh network of humanitarian organisations with the same name – Humanitarian Advisory Group –supports and advises the national Humanitarian Coordination Task Team.

inSights (the Institute of Innovation for Gender and Humanitarian Transformation) is a Bangladesh-based social enterprise providing insights that challenge the current ways of working in humanitarian aid and gender affairs. inSights aims to transform ideas within the humanitarian, social and businesses sectors, turning them into innovations, knowledge and strategies.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CPP	Cyclone Preparedness Programme
DDGP	District Development and Growth Plan
DDM	Department of Disaster Management
DM	Disaster Management
DMC	Disaster Management Committee
DRM	Disaster Risk Management
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
GIHA	Gender Equality in Humanitarian Action
HCTT	Humanitarian Coordination Task Team
INFORM	Index for Risk Management
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
ISCG	Inter-Sector Coordination Group
JRP	Joint Response Plan
KII	Key Informant Interview
LCG	Local Consultative Group
LDC	Least Developed Country
L/Nas	Local and National Actors
MDB	Multilateral Development Bank
MoDMR	Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief
NAP	National Adaptation Plan
NDMF	National Disaster Management Fund
NDMP	National Disaster Management Policy
NDRFS	National Disaster Risk Financing Strategy
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NPDM	National Plan for Disaster Management
SFDRR	Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030
SOD	Standing Orders on Disaster
SPEED	Strategic Preparedness for Response and Resilience to Disaster
UKHIH	United Kingdom Humanitarian Innovation Hub
UN	United Nations

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

The Bangladesh parliamentary elections in January 2024 cemented the country's transition to a dominant-party political system. Aided by an opposition boycott on Election Day, the Awami League extended its 15 years in power with another five-year term. However, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina then resigned following anti-government protests in August 2024, and the interim government faces challenges in Bangladesh's political, economic, and security situations as it continues to reform. Figure 1 summarises the key points in this governance transition.

Figure 1: Key events in Bangladesh's change of government[1]

CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT

In mid-2024 the government reinstated a quota system in which **56%** of government positions were allocated to specific groups, most notably **30%** for children and grandchildren of freedom fighters who fought the Liberation War in 1971

Anti-government demonstrations and protests began in response to the changes

The government shut down internet access, imposed a national curfew and deployed armed forces

Violent clashes and a heavy-handed security response led to approximately **1423** fatalities and over **22,000** arrests

On the 8th of August 2024, Muhammad Yunus was sworn in as the leader of the caretaker government

How should the humanitarian system respond?

This political transition has implications for how the humanitarian system will function in Bangladesh. Emergency response relies on national humanitarian systems, and the relationships and ways of working between sub-national, national, and international government and non-government actors. In all humanitarian contexts, humanitarian actors are required to navigate political dynamics to meet the needs of crisis-affected populations. Major shifts in sub-national or national politics present both risks and opportunities for humanitarian actors both in Bangladesh and beyond, which have not been explored thoroughly to date.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

The **purpose** of the rapid review is to explore opportunities for the Bangladesh humanitarian sector to strengthen systems, processes, and partnerships to better meet the needs of crisis-affected populations amidst the changing political situation. The **overarching research question** is:

▎ How can the humanitarian system in the current political climate in Bangladesh shift to better meet the needs of current and future crisis-affected populations?

The 'Research Framework' in Annex I details how the sub-research questions address the specific objectives. They identify and explore:

- challenges humanitarian actors faced in meeting the needs of crisis-affected populations under the previous government, with a focus on systemic, political and relational factors between the Government of Bangladesh and humanitarian actors

- opportunities and challenges the change in government presents for humanitarian actor operations, with a focus on systemic, political and relational factors

- key actions that government, international and national humanitarian actors can take to overcome challenges and maximise opportunities in the new political era.

> ### Box 1: Why now? Exploring the window of opportunity for humanitarian operations
>
> The recent shift in the political landscape in Bangladesh presents a window of opportunity to inform humanitarian thinking, practice and ways of working. The country is at a critical juncture, with tensions and systematic challenges that affect the humanitarian community's ability to meet needs.
>
> This research contributes to a renewed and collective focus on humanitarian reform. It aims to inform stakeholders facing political transition about opportunities in other countries to achieve better outcomes for crisis-affected populations.

STRUCTURE

This report has four key sections. Section 1 introduces the research and outlines the background, scope and methodology. Section 2 describes the context of humanitarian reform in Bangladesh. Section 3 unpacks four reform priority areas, including why they are priorities, how they relate to crisis-affected populations, and the opportunities to progress them. Section 4 concludes the report and summarises the way forward.

Graffiti in Rajshahi, Bangladesh after July 2024 revolution. *Caption: '[We] wanted Rights but instead became Razakars' in reference to a derogatory term referring to war criminals during the 1971 Bangladesh war of independence.* ManikDas1122 / Wikimedia Commons

METHODS

This review was primarily qualitative and exploratory. All data collection was completed in November 2024, followed by a workshop in the first week of December 2024 to test and refine emerging findings and identify opportunities with key stakeholders in Bangladesh. Figure 2 provides an overview of the methodology.

Figure 2: Methodology

30 documents reviewed:
- Policies and humanitarian frameworks
- Humanitarian response plans and evaluation reports
- Thematic studies and humanitarian cluster analysis
- Media and academic literature

12 interviews with:
- District and sub-district government/local government representatives in Cox's Bazar and Noakhali districts
- International humanitarian actors and humanitarian coordination system representatives
- National and local humanitarian actors and cluster leads

6 community consultations including separate group discussions with men and women in:
- Cox's Bazar refugee community
- Cox's Bazar Bangladeshi host community
- Noakhali District flood affected community

1 sense-making workshop with participants from:
- National humanitarian organisations
- International humanitarian organisations

Localised research practices
- Joint design approach with InSights
- Joint Analysis process with InSights
- Over 30% of the budget transferred to InSights

LIMITATIONS

Rapid review: Findings from this research were drawn from a small sample of relevant documentation, 12 key informant interviews and six consultations with communities. This was in line with the main intent of providing rapid and timely insights to support humanitarian and government actors navigating the current situation rather than providing a comprehensive and extensive review that would have reduced the window of opportunity.

Crisis- affected populations: The research focused on supporting actors to seize opportunities to meet the needs of diverse populations in Bangladesh, rather than focusing on challenges for specific populations (e.g. Rohingya refugees). Therefore, the term 'crisis-affected populations' refers to all people residing in Bangladesh who are affected by crises.

Availability of stakeholders: The nature of this rapid review meant that some regional stakeholders, donors and Bangladesh government employees were unable or did not wish to participate even with guarantee of anonymity.

Graffiti in Rajshahi, Bangladesh after July 2024 revolution. ManikDas1122 / Wikimedia Commons

SECTION 2: SETTING THE SCENE: UNDERSTANDING BANGLADESH'S DISASTER RESPONSE STRUCTURE AS A FOUNDATION FOR CHANGE

This section provides a brief overview of Bangladesh's disaster, climate risk and humanitarian structures and the institutional arrangements that support them. This section provides important context for the research question focus on the systemic, political and relationship challenges humanitarian actors face in providing meaningful and appropriate support to affected populations in Bangladesh under the previous regime, and in the opportunities arising through the political transition.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE

Bangladesh has experienced strong economic growth in recent decades and is set to graduate from least developed country (LDC) to developing country status by 2026. According to the World Bank, Bangladesh's GDP grew by an average of 6.6% annually between 2005 and 2019.[2] The percentage of the population living below the national poverty line has more than halved since 2000. This has been driven by a structural transformation of the economy from agriculture to industrial production and services, an expansion of labour-intensive employment, especially in the export-oriented ready-made garment industry, and growth in remittances from migrant workers.[3] Despite this impressive progress, a World Bank study (2019)[4] noted that around half

the population can be considered vulnerable to poverty, and that between 2010 and 2016, despite accelerated economic growth, the rate of poverty reduction slowed.
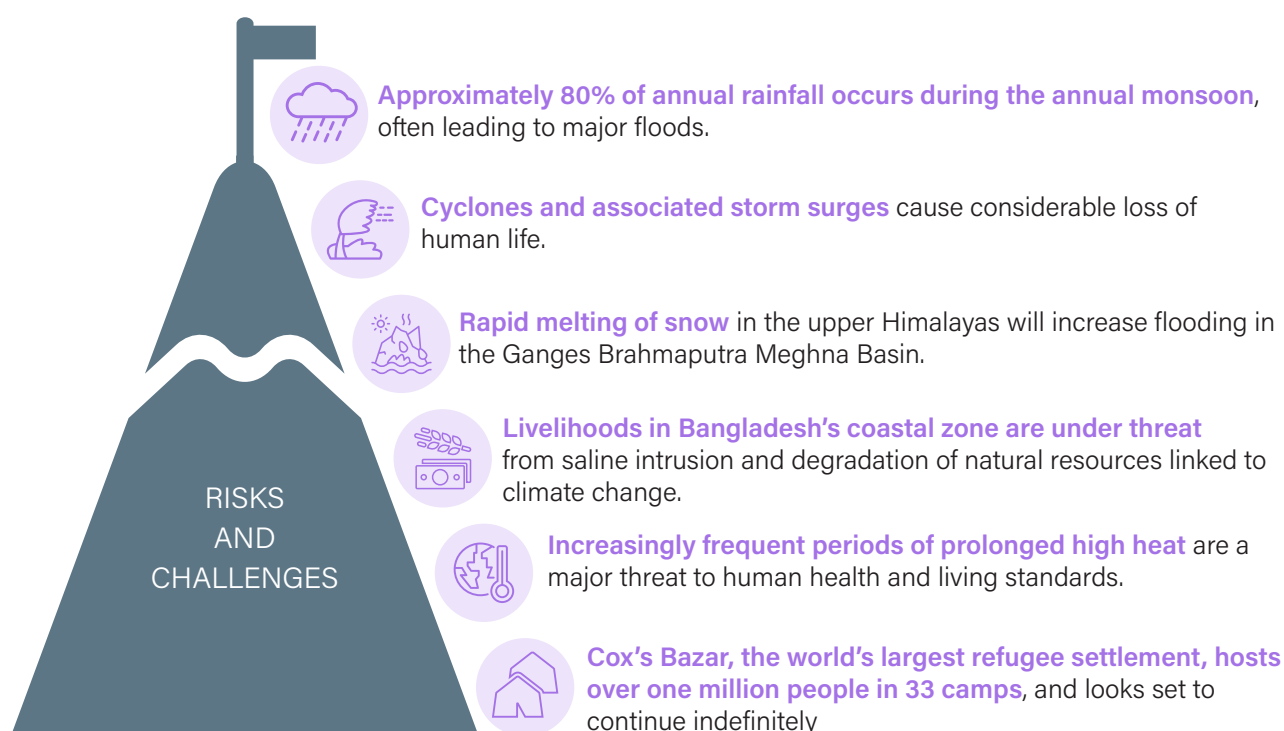
CLIMATE AND DISASTER RISK PROFILE

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with an estimated population of 171.2 million and an annual growth rate of 1.1% in 2022.[5] Only 40% of the population lived in urban areas in 2022, centred around Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna; half of the urban population lives in slums. Bangladesh is a low-lying country on the delta formed by the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna rivers. Most of Bangladesh's 130,170 km² land area between the Himalayas and the Bay of Bengal consists of low-lying deltaic floodplains less than 15 metres (m) above sea level.[6] Sixty per cent of these plains are less than 6 m above sea level[7] and highly flood prone.[8] The combination of high population density and flood risk makes Bangladesh one of the most disaster-vulnerable countries.[9]

Existing and forecast challenges facing Bangladesh are listed in Figure 3. Box 2 provides key information about the Rohingya refugee crisis.

Figure 3: Existing and forecast humanitarian risks and challenges in Bangladesh
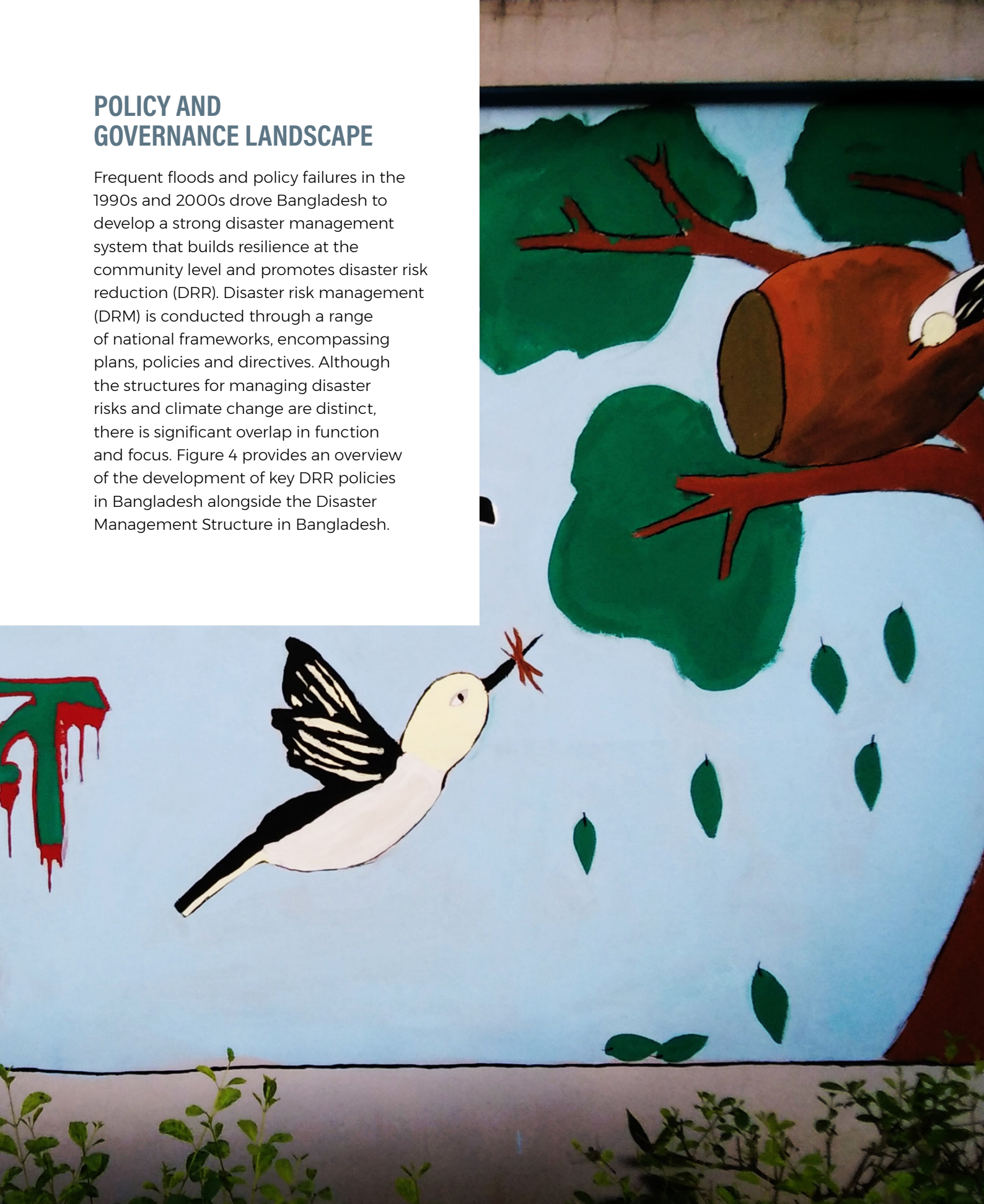

Approximately 80% of annual rainfall occurs during the annual monsoon, often leading to major floods.

Cyclones and associated storm surges cause considerable loss of human life.

Rapid melting of snow in the upper Himalayas will increase flooding in the Ganges Brahmaputra Meghna Basin.

Livelihoods in Bangladesh's coastal zone are under threat from saline intrusion and degradation of natural resources linked to climate change.

Increasingly frequent periods of prolonged high heat are a major threat to human health and living standards.

Cox's Bazar, the world's largest refugee settlement, hosts over one million people in 33 camps, and looks set to continue indefinitely

RISKS
AND
CHALLENGES

🏃‍➡️ Box 2: The Rohingya refugee crisis

Rohingya refugees have been arriving in Bangladesh for decades, but the recent influx triggered a protracted humanitarian crisis. The country hosts 877,710 registered Rohingya refugees,[10] a stateless Muslim ethnic minority driven out of Myanmar by a violent military crackdown in August 2017. Within the space of several months, over 700,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh,[11] Refugees live in temporary shelters in overcrowded camps, with 40,000 people per square kilometre in the Cox's Bazar district. They are highly vulnerable to floods and landslides, although measures are being taken to reduce those risks.[12] While humanitarian agencies are meeting refugees' immediate needs, medium-term needs such as building resilience, durable shelter, education and tackling gender-based violence are being neglected.

The Government of Bangladesh's official position, backed by international partners, is that Myanmar must create conditions for Rohingya refugees to repatriate, but large-scale returns are extremely unlikely in the near term. The government's focus on repatriation has complicated humanitarian and development actors' longer-term planning for Rohingya refugees. Freedom of movement, livelihood support and formal education are restricted. Rohingya refugees remain dependent upon humanitarian aid; in 2015, 94% were highly or moderately vulnerable and in need of humanitarian assistance to meet basic needs.[13] The refugee influx has been an economic and environmental strain for Cox's Bazar. The influx has intensified pressure on environmental resources, employment opportunities, infrastructure and services, and exacerbated risks of conflict between Rohingya and host communities. It also increased the occurrences and risks of disease outbreaks, including Cholera, Dengue, diphtheria and scabies.[14] Despite international efforts to balance support to refugees and host communities, tensions persist, largely over economic competition and perceived unfair aid allocation.
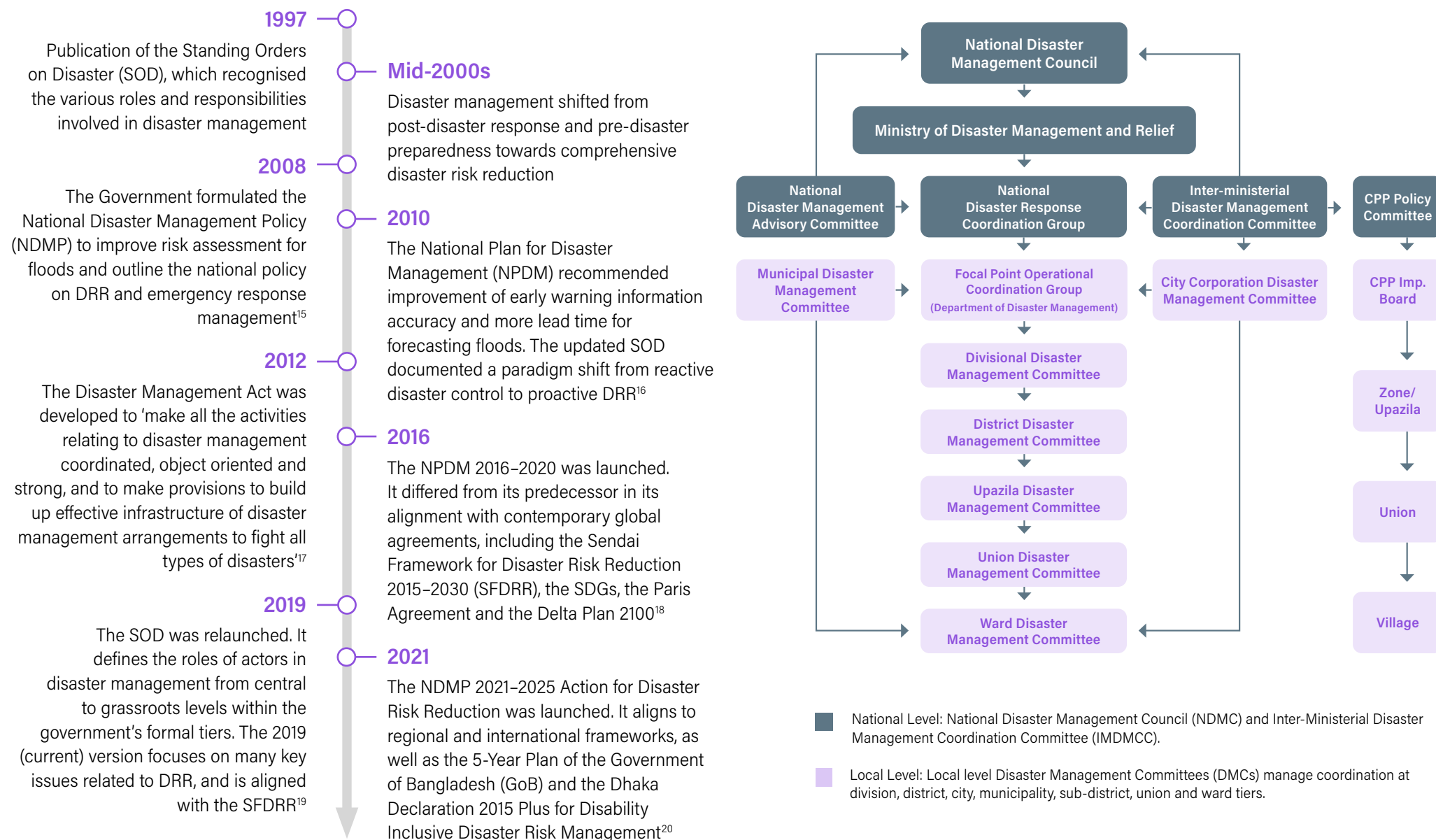
POLICY AND GOVERNANCE LANDSCAPE

Frequent floods and policy failures in the 1990s and 2000s drove Bangladesh to develop a strong disaster management system that builds resilience at the community level and promotes disaster risk reduction (DRR). Disaster risk management (DRM) is conducted through a range of national frameworks, encompassing plans, policies and directives. Although the structures for managing disaster risks and climate change are distinct, there is significant overlap in function and focus. Figure 4 provides an overview of the development of key DRR policies in Bangladesh alongside the Disaster Management Structure in Bangladesh.

Graffiti in Rajshahi, Bangladesh after July 2024 revolution. *With dreams, we will build our country, your and my Bangladesh.* Photo: Mmrsafy / Wikimedia Commons

Figure 4: Overview of the development of key DRR policies in Bangladesh alongside the Disaster Management Structure in Bangladesh
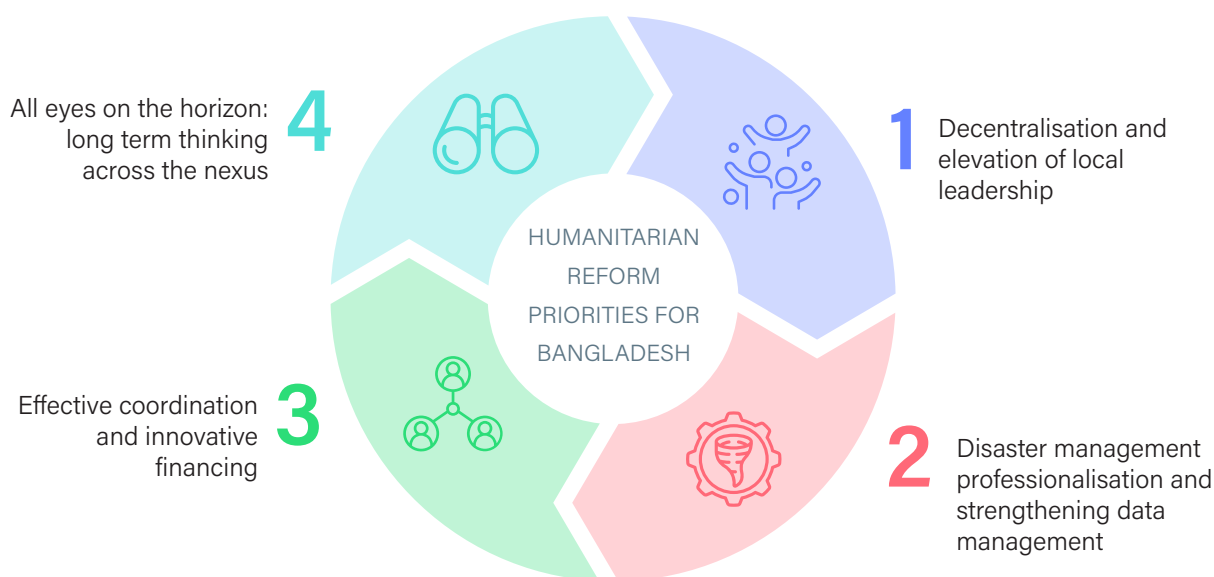
1997

Publication of the Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD), which recognised the various roles and responsibilities involved in disaster management

Mid-2000s

Disaster management shifted from post-disaster response and pre-disaster preparedness towards comprehensive disaster risk reduction

2008

The Government formulated the National Disaster Management Policy (NDMP) to improve risk assessment for floods and outline the national policy on DRR and emergency response management[15]

2010

The National Plan for Disaster Management (NPDM) recommended improvement of early warning information accuracy and more lead time for forecasting floods. The updated SOD documented a paradigm shift from reactive disaster control to proactive DRR[16]

2012

The Disaster Management Act was developed to 'make all the activities relating to disaster management coordinated, object oriented and strong, and to make provisions to build up effective infrastructure of disaster management arrangements to fight all types of disasters'[17]

2016

The NPDM 2016–2020 was launched. It differed from its predecessor in its alignment with contemporary global agreements, including the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (SFDRR), the SDGs, the Paris Agreement and the Delta Plan 2100[18]

2019

The SOD was relaunched. It defines the roles of actors in disaster management from central to grassroots levels within the government's formal tiers. The 2019 (current) version focuses on many key issues related to DRR, and is aligned with the SFDRR[19]

2021

The NDMP 2021–2025 Action for Disaster Risk Reduction was launched. It aligns to regional and international frameworks, as well as the 5-Year Plan of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) and the Dhaka Declaration 2015 Plus for Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Management[20]

National Disaster Management Council

Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief

National Disaster Management Advisory Committee

National Disaster Response Coordination Group

Inter-ministerial Disaster Management Coordination Committee

CPP Policy Committee

Municipal Disaster Management Committee

Focal Point Operational Coordination Group (Department of Disaster Management)

City Corporation Disaster Management Committee

CPP Imp. Board

Divisional Disaster Management Committee

District Disaster Management Committee

Zone/ Upazila

Upazila Disaster Management Committee

Union Disaster Management Committee

Union

Ward Disaster Management Committee

Village

National Level: National Disaster Management Council (NDMC) and Inter-Ministerial Disaster Management Coordination Committee (IMDMCC).

Local Level: Local level Disaster Management Committees (DMCs) manage coordination at division, district, city, municipality, sub-district, union and ward tiers.

Graffiti in Rajshahi, Bangladesh after July 2024 revolution. *Caption: With dreams, we will build our country, your and my Bangladesh.* Photo: Mmrsafy / Wikimedia Commons

SECTION 3: PRIORITIES FOR HUMANITARIAN REFORM

Interviews, community consultations and desk-based analysis illustrate four intersecting areas for humanitarian and disaster management reform. This section explores each of these priorities, including the specific impacts they have on crisis-affected populations, and possible solutions and actions that the transitional and future Government of Bangladesh and its humanitarian partners should consider. These four areas are summarised in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: Summary of humanitarian reform priorities in Bangladesh:

4 All eyes on the horizon: long term thinking across the nexus

1 Decentralisation and elevation of local leadership

HUMANITARIAN REFORM PRIORITIES FOR BANGLADESH

3 Effective coordination and innovative financing

2 Disaster management professionalisation and strengthening data management

What are the issues?

Despite investment and progress in comprehensive community-level DRR with local community involvement, the disaster management framework in Bangladesh is not structured in a way that facilitates transparent, locally grounded solutions and leadership during disasters. This reform priority encompasses several interrelated structural barriers to improved humanitarian action in Bangladesh.

❶ Roles and responsibilities: confusion around who should be doing what

One of the most significant challenges raised by stakeholders was confusion between government disaster management roles and Ministerial or political positions. The SOD designates Members of Parliament as 'advisers' to local Disaster Management Committees (DMCs), without specification, leaving scope for intervention and politically influenced decision-making. A 2022 review of disaster management capability found a 'functional overlap linking disaster management operations to the dominance and influence of the politicians involved'.[22] Research participants raised this as a priority for reform, with flood-affected communities identifying that it led to favouritism, exclusion, diversion and lack of effective and independent use of resources. Some interviewees also gave examples of local politicians seeking to place contacts within local organisations.

> In the last few years, the ward members [local leaders] also worked under political influence. They show more damage than what actually happened. For instance, if a house was not damaged in the flood, they showed that it did get damaged. So there was a lot of fake information. They did it to get more resource allocation to their specific area. [National Humanitarian Actor] [23]

One interviewee reflected on a shift toward autocracy in recent years, in which counter-power and space for criticism had eroded, reducing accountability in government aid and beneficiary selection processes. Refugee relief, Repatriation Commissioner and disaster management public servant functions were described as under political pressure and having to comply with the directions of Members of Parliament. Similar political interference was noted in humanitarian distribution and need assessment at the sub-district and town levels (upazila and parishad levels). For example, one participant hired a third party to check the veracity of government-led needs assessment, who found a significant discrepancy between lists that was linked to political influence.

> The local chairmen and members decide who will get aid. Some people receive aid five times while others get nothing. There's clear favouritism. They [local chairmen and members of parliament] create lists of who to give aid to and who to exclude. [...] Local leaders often take voter ID cards or mobile numbers for aid distribution, but these are misused. There's no platform for us to raise our voices against this injustice. [Flood-Affected Community Member] [24]

❶ Centralisation of decision making

Whilst local Disaster Management Committees (DMCs) exist from ward to divisional level (see Figure 4), the disaster management coordination structure is not contextualised to local needs or nuances. Participants feel that despite there being a devolved structure, it is not decentralised, with power and decision-making responsibility retained in Dhaka. Local DMC representatives, in addition to being heavily influenced by local political representatives around needs and priorities, are not empowered to make decisions as outlined in a recent review of Bangladesh DM institutional and Policy challenges, which noted that the DM framework lacks accountability to ensure local involvement:[25]
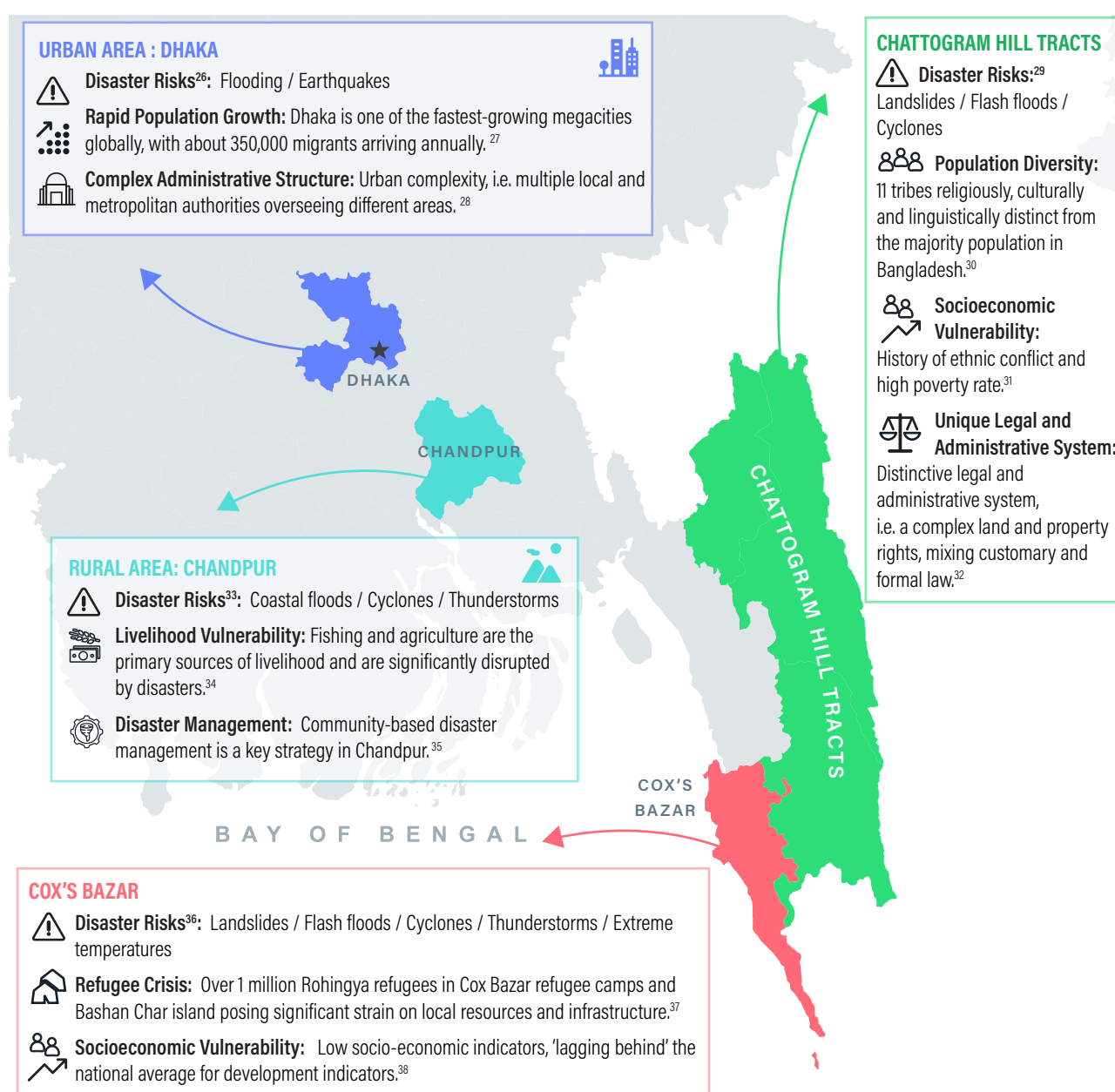
Box 3 presents some of the unique local contexts in Bangladesh, highlighting the importance of tailored structures to meet diverse sub-national needs.

⬡△◇□ **Box 3: Diversity in disasters – critical contextual differences within Bangladesh**

Bangladesh is a very diverse socio-economically, geographically and from a disaster risk perspective. Urban and remote areas face very different hazards, and the refugee settings in Cox's Bazar and Bashan Char are unique, posing additional complexity to respond to disasters in each area. The Chattogram Hill Tracts is another unique area, with a cultural and governmental structure and parallel kinship system that adds to the complexity of coordinating humanitarian action. Figure 6 provides a snapshot of some of the differences between areas of Bangladesh.

Figure 6: A diversity of settings affecting humanitarian response in Bangladesh

URBAN AREA : DHAKA

⚠ **Disaster Risks[26]:** Flooding / Earthquakes

↗ **Rapid Population Growth:** Dhaka is one of the fastest-growing megacities globally, with about 350,000 migrants arriving annually. [27]

🏛 **Complex Administrative Structure:** Urban complexity, i.e. multiple local and metropolitan authorities overseeing different areas. [28]

CHATTOGRAM HILL TRACTS

⚠ **Disaster Risks:[29]** Landslides / Flash floods / Cyclones

👪 **Population Diversity:** 11 tribes religiously, culturally and linguistically distinct from the majority population in Bangladesh.[30]

👥↗ **Socioeconomic Vulnerability:** History of ethnic conflict and high poverty rate.[31]

⚖ **Unique Legal and Administrative System:** Distinctive legal and administrative system, i.e. a complex land and property rights, mixing customary and formal law.[32]

DHAKA

CHANDPUR

CHATTOGRAM HILL TRACTS

COX'S BAZAR

RURAL AREA: CHANDPUR

⚠ **Disaster Risks[33]:** Coastal floods / Cyclones / Thunderstorms

💰 **Livelihood Vulnerability:** Fishing and agriculture are the primary sources of livelihood and are significantly disrupted by disasters.[34]

🛡 **Disaster Management:** Community-based disaster management is a key strategy in Chandpur. [35]

BAY OF BENGAL

COX'S BAZAR

⚠ **Disaster Risks[36]:** Landslides / Flash floods / Cyclones / Thunderstorms / Extreme temperatures

🏠 **Refugee Crisis:** Over 1 million Rohingya refugees in Cox Bazar refugee camps and Bashan Char island posing significant strain on local resources and infrastructure.[37]

👥↗ **Socioeconomic Vulnerability:** Low socio-economic indicators, 'lagging behind' the national average for development indicators.[38]

❗ Limited opportunity to progress localisation

The overlap and confusion between political positions and disaster management roles, the centralisation of decision-making authority and lack of contextualised disaster management models are significant barriers to local participation and leadership. This creates an environment favourable for aid diversions and corruption to happen. Examples of specific ways in which these issues affect local actors include:

- Long delays in project approvals, resulting in missed funding opportunities and reduced trust in local humanitarian actors from donors and community members

- Difficulty to adhere to humanitarian principles, for example, facing political pressure to give aid to certain population groups, or to divert relief to politicians themselves

- Political leaders influencing ability to program in specific areas, resulting in operational limitations or constraints

- Further marginalisation of the identified crisis-affected populations.

> " Many times, some influential person comes and tells us that we must give them this many packets, from the relief. I have donor accountability; how can I give those away? On the other hand, from our place, we cannot identify or complain about the people who do this because of political reasons. Another thing is the people who work in political groups have many people whom they want to insert in our line of work for a job. [Humanitarian Actor]

Research participants highlighted that the basic needs of crisis-affected populations remained unmet due to centralised structures enabling political corruption and lack of timely access for local and national actors.

> " Usually, floods affect both the rich and the poor. However, there are significant inequalities. For example, one person might receive nine litres of oil along with other supplies [because of their political ties], while another person [from the opposition party] might not get anything at all. Some people survive on dry puffed rice or similar foods. The distribution isn't fair, and everyone's needs are not met equally. [Flood-Affected Community Member] [39]

Crisis-affected communities also highlighted security and protection concerns. The lack of safe reporting is due to unmet needs and the abuse of power by local leaders and government actors in influencing disaster response. Consulted community members felt powerless to combat the injustice, corruption and organised crime they experienced in humanitarian settings.

One stakeholder reflected on a local actor withdrawing due to the sub-district (Upazila level) political pressure they faced that compromised their work and ability to serve most in-need populations. Political influence in disaster response erodes community trust, and increases their perceptions of criminality and impunity in the political system. This creates tensions and resentment between community groups.

These aid diversion and corruption dynamics result in local actors, who have a deep understanding of community needs, being hindered/unable to deliver timely, equitable, relevant assistance, particularly as crises evolve.

⚡ What are the solutions?

Stakeholders highlighted the following ways to overcome the complex structural challenges to transparent, locally led disaster management in Bangladesh:

✔ **Separate political and operational functions and improve independence about roles to prevent political interference, coupled with transparent and independent accountability mechanisms**

   – *The GoB* should revisit the SOD to clarify roles and mitigate the risk of political influence and establish independent monitoring mechanisms

   – *International and national humanitarian actors* should advocate for a participatory, transparent revision process

   – *Donors* should provide financial support to the GoB to undertake the process, if required.

✔ **Initiate bottom-up decentralised approaches to disaster management grounded in local contextual realities and leadership**

   – In revisiting the SOD, the *GoB* should consider the decentralisation of decision making from the Dhaka level to the ward, union and upazila levels. Specific consideration should be given to acknowledging the traditional structures in the Chattogram Hill Tracts context and designing effective, clear and contextual lines of governance

   – *International and national humanitarian actors* should continue to seek opportunities to elevate community perspectives in decision making, including their role in influencing a revised SOD.

Separate functions and improve clarity about roles

Stakeholders called for the SOD to be revised to delineate roles and separate functions to prevent political interference, and for DMCs to have more independence and authority. These critical steps will help to mitigate political influence over disaster management. However, complementary mechanisms are required to strengthen the accountability of systems, structures and individuals.

> ❝ We want representatives who can effectively communicate our needs to the authorities or government. We want spaces where we can share our problems without fear of discrimination and suppression. [Cox's Bazar Host Community Member][40]

Examples of independent checking of the veracity of needs and priorities demonstrate that there is scope to reduce political influence. However, as identified above, local organisations and DM bureaucrats still face political pressure, highlighting that additional mechanisms are required at all levels. One district-level DM official explained how they managed to avoid political pressure by cross-checking the list of affected population with an independent assessment led by an external agency. That assessment found 40% of affected population on the district list did not meet the selection criteria.

Independent monitoring and reporting mechanisms are required. A recent study of the possibilities for enhanced local leadership in the Rohingya crisis articulated that enhanced organisational governance and eliminating nepotism and one-person leadership are key steps to reduce political interference and therefore create more trust and opportunity to lead.[41] This was also re-enforced by Bangladeshi humanitarian actors interviewed who called for a greater move away from 'centralised colonial governance structures' and greater space for independent third-party accountability mechanisms, ensuring 'no more humanitarian projects without independent assessments'. They also called for strengthening of the coordination and governance capacity at district and sub-district levels as necessary step for effective localisation.

> **If proper oversight were in place, corruption wouldn't be as rampant in our country. Only political leaders benefit, while the actual work remains undone. [...] I believe the change must begin at the village level. Most of the decision-making and monitoring happens at the top, leaving those of us on the ground deprived. The negligence of those responsible in the middle is the root cause of our suffering. Corruption is pervasive in society. If we could eliminate it, we would see transformative change across all levels—social, political, educational, and even in our livelihoods. [Flood-Affected Community Member]** [42]

Initiate bottom-up decentralised approaches to disaster management

To respond effectively to diverse needs across Bangladesh, stakeholders called for a decentralised and bottom-up approach to disaster management. A bottom-up approach would enable more contextualised and relevant approaches at all levels. In practice, this requires a decentralisation of decision-making accountability from the national level in Dhaka to the ward, union and upazila levels.

> **We need to bring change at the grassroots level, union level, upazila level. When we have that strength, the process of disaster management and preparedness, duly disaster management would become much easier. I am not hopeless at all! I believe that Bangladesh will become a prime and ideal example soon. In order to do that we need to decentralise power. [District Government Official]** [43]

Greater decision-making authority for local government representatives would increase effective and efficient response and enable more local participation and leadership. Community members and civil society actors consulted also called for greater participation of affected communities in decision-making, and approaches that centre the needs of populations, noting that reform would not succeed without meaningful community involvement.

Graffiti in Tangail, Bangladesh after July 2024 revolution.
Kryesmin / Wikimedia Commons

PRIORITY 2: DISASTER MANAGEMENT PROFESSIONALISATION AND STRENGTHENING DATA MANAGEMENT

What are the issues?

❶ Limited skills, competence and experience

There is a need to strengthen professional capacities among disaster management operations personnel in Bangladesh; with central and local DMC members being found to lack skills, competence and experience.[44] Several participants noted that many government actors are either generalists or political leaders who lack understanding of how to implement key DM policies and frameworks. The need to strengthen DM capability was also raised in a recent HCTT meeting (April 2024) – specifically, to 'develop the capacity of the Disaster Management Committees to effectively perform their roles as outlined in the SOD.'[45] For example, one upazila-level DMC member was unaware of the SOD, despite having been involved in aid distribution during the response to Tropical Cyclone Mocha in 2024. Another described the perception that there is an active desire among national DM bodies to avoid building capability in local disaster management to retain influence. Several interviewees also noted specific gaps in capability around gender, protection and inclusion.

> The administration [national government] doesn't want the field level workers to develop or capacity-building because they want to control them. [46]

❶ Recruiting and retaining the right people

In addition to capability gaps, stakeholders noted the high turnover rate of staff and leaders eroded continuity and capacity, particularly at the local level. The question of inclusivity and representativity of youth and women in DM operation staff was also raised during validation, reflecting on the composition of the public sector and limitations of the quota system that sparked the July uprisings also as relevant in the DM sector.

> When leadership changes so fast, coping with it becomes difficult for us, as different administration leads differently. It is not only at the national level but also in local district level. [National Humanitarian Actor] [47]

Despite these identified gaps, some stakeholders also noted investments, initiatives and increased NGO presence over time contributing to better early warning, better preparedness planning and reduced mortality. However, professionalisation and capacity building still require ongoing investment as part of a reform agenda.

> We do have a very systematic structure for the Department of Disaster Management and Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, that is not the problem. The problem is, 1–their capacity, 2–the digital system use, they are not oriented towards it. So these two are very crucial points for reform. [National Humanitarian Actor] [48]

❶ Doubling down on data

As well as generalist skills and capabilities, participants identified that there has been limited investment in DM stakeholders capability to collect timely and high-quality disaggregated data, which is integral to rapid, effective and targeted humanitarian responses. Stakeholders identified improvement due to specific initiatives and support, such as technical advice from ACAPS, but confirmed that more could be done. They noted that:

- The provision of information is slow
- There is a lack of sufficient qualitative data
- Data is collected by the government and HCTT systems separately (see also priority 3) and
- Collection of gender, age, and disability disaggregated data is weak.

> "Another big way to get out of this is data. We do not have disaggregated data, therefore we cannot show it to the policymakers. They are thinking that the people who work with women rights shout only women. If we had disaggregated data, we could show why we are saying these, why most of the women are being affected and where they are being affected. [International Humanitarian Actor] [49]

Poor data management reduces the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of responses and inhibits evidence-informed planning for future crises. Even when data is collected, it is not stored and managed well. Stakeholders pointed out that the government data management system is not fit for purpose. Stakeholders also raised the issue of independence, claiming that lack of transparency and political interference reduced trust in the data (see also Priority 1).

> "People lack confidence in our data and the government provided data. How to create dependable and accurate data, that is something we should work on, because only then can we plan properly. For instance, the data that came in the census, no one accepts it. [International Humanitarian Actor] [50]

Consequently, parallel data management initiatives, developed and owned by other humanitarian actors, have proliferated. Attempts to rectify this problem (such as the Index for Risk Management [INFORM] initiative) are underway; see Box 4.

Impact of the lack of data and disaster management capability on crisis-affected populations

The gaps in capability of key DM personnel in Bangladesh delay and undermine assistance to certain groups in crisis-affected populations. Without a strong understanding of how the system works and the roles and functions within it, government DM personnel are unable to identify and meet the needs of the most vulnerable populations.

> "Even if they do understand gender, they do not know how to address it. Each of our policy documents or strategies drafted or approved in the last ten years contains gender. But when it comes to the actual strategy, about the actual plan and action, there is not much of it, such as in the NAP. There is a huge gap in the action part because they do not understand what to write in the activities even if they understand gender equality. [51] [International Humanitarian Actor]

The risks to vulnerable groups in disasters, including women and children, are well documented. Lack of disaggregated data impairs the ability of stakeholders to identify and meet their needs. Moreover, delays in collection of data hinder timely and effective humanitarian response.

> "We are not fast enough to reach the affected population. A major reason behind this is that we don't have the information. It takes six to seven days after the crisis for the SOS to come to the website. [52] [Government Official]

INFORM
INDEX FOR RISK MANAGEMENT **Box 4: about INFORM**

The UN Resident Coordinator's Office developed INFORM in collaboration with the MoDMR and with technical support from the Network for Information, Response and Preparedness Activities on Disaster and the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. INFORM is a localised, sub-national risk index developed through the use of a global open source risk assessment tool in order to identify and monitor risks for targeted interventions in Bangladesh's 64 districts. INFORM seeks to support the government, funding agencies and humanitarian and development parts to align actions and resources for shared and integrated DRM, including DRR, anticipatory action and humanitarian planning. [53]

💡 What are the solutions?

Stakeholders highlighted the following solutions and actions to overcome the challenges related to DM capability:

✔ **Systematically build disaster management and response technical expertise and competencies among government (district and sub-district) and local humanitarian actors – including on protection, gender and inclusion**

  – *The GoB* should review national approaches to DM capacity building and elevating the importance of DM capability

  – *The GoB* should strengthen DDM's expertise and capacity and capacity as a technical hub for DM

  – *International and national humanitarian actors and donors* should support the GoB in undertaking the review and, ensuring collective buy in, application of learning and resources. They should also support capacity building initiatives with a focus on strengthening DDM's expertise.

✔ **Strengthen capacities and systems to collect, analyse, store and manage disaggregated data in an accountable, transparent and efficient way among government district and sub-district DM sections**

  – *The GoB* should invest in data management capabilities and systems, linked to the process of reviewing the SOD and separating operational and political functions

  – *International and national humanitarian actors* should advocate to the GoB for stronger systems and processes for collecting and managing data transparently, as well as integrating data into capability building initiatives (as suggested above).

Build disaster management and response technical expertise and competencies

Despite promising ongoing initiatives to strengthen DM capacity, stakeholders called for further investment to strengthen the professionalisation of DM practitioners, with a focus on government staff. The current approaches to DM capacity building should be reviewed, with a view to strengthening DM as an area of technical expertise, including at the university level. Recent studies[54] have suggested that theoretical and practical DM training would enhance skills and capacities, and that technical capability could benefit from the support of NGOs and other funding agencies. Applying learning and practices from other contexts would be particularly helpful in strengthening capability in protection, gender and inclusion issues in Bangladesh, and help to shift towards more nuanced and inclusive responses.

> ❝ We have to organise our work order. Before, during, and after disaster works should be done through table exercise, drill exercise, training on a large scale. The way I work is through NGO and because I have my own resources, but we need more funding to work on the systems and software. [District Government Official] [55]

There is also a clear opportunity to ensure that local actors are targeted for local capacity building plans so they can more proactively contribute to needs assessment and planning.

Strengthen capacities and systems to effectively collect, analyse, store and manage disaggregated data

Investment in data collection capacity (linked to professionalisation), including collection of disaggregated data to help effective identification of at-risk groups, is vital. Several government and humanitarian actors interviewed stressed the value of accurate data and data management systems to inform prioritisation, policy and learning.[56]

Strengthening management systems and systematic recording is also important. In prioritising separation of functions (Priority 1) ensure that data management procedures and systems are transparent, accountable and not susceptible to political influence.

> **After a disaster happens, the core data is not stored or archived properly. These data help us in our later plannings. This is a big gap. [...] Firstly, [humanitarian clusters] need to collect the disaster emergency information, and keep it updated. Secondly, we need to revise the selection criteria of the long-term projects. If I talk about climate change and vulnerability, then identifying the specific areas of vulnerable people, and preparing a database for it. Recommendations should be created based on this data and continuing it in a way that no political party can come and change it. [National Humanitarian Actor]** [57]

The INFORM initiative can be leveraged to ensure that sub-national levels have sound data collection systems with reduced duplication and increased efficiency.

Graffiti in Tangail, Bangladesh after July 2024 revolution. Kryesmin / Wikimedia Commons

PRIORITY 3: EFFECTIVE COORDINATION AND INNOVATIVE FINANCING

What are the issues?

❶ Duplication and confusion in coordination

Disaster management in Bangladesh involves government and humanitarian organisations – including the UN, INGOS, NGOs and community groups – operating in parallel. To add to the complexity, a third structure exists in the Cox's Bazar district, with RRRC coordinating the refugee response.

These parallel systems are top-down in approach and governance; many participants commented on their inefficiency and the barriers they pose to local actor participation and leadership. Systems existing in parallel create inefficiencies due to duplication and loss of expertise and exclude local actor participation and leadership due to a lack of coordination and transparency.

> **The conclusion to it is that [the Rohingya crisis response] was not people driven. It was centrally planned, centrally executed and the UN and other INGOs also did the same. The government did not give space in the local level consultative process, where it could have been handled the best. Maybe [the national government] wrote it on paper, but not in reality. [National Humanitarian Actor]** [58]

Stakeholders spoke about the bureaucratic delays and challenges the parallel systems create. For example, in natural disasters, the HCTT leads on the development of needs assessments, but these require government endorsement. This slows the ability of actors to identify and meet needs. There is also a separation of needs assessment data and reporting: the HCTT system does not report government data, whilst the Government does not report on non-Government data. One interviewee remembered delays of several weeks in gaining government endorsement of HCTT needs assessment data but acknowledged that these had reduced over time. The lack of joint needs assessment undermines planning for risk-informed development. [59]

> **The biggest gap I faced was that of coordination. Coordination with the Sectors, coordination with the government and even the coordination with the international community. Because there are 3-4 types of stakeholders. There are local, national, international, UN, ISCG, administration, DC, RRRC etc. Because of the gap in coordination, we cannot work properly. [International Humanitarian Actor]** [60]

These challenges are not unique to Bangladesh, with research across middle-income countries (which Bangladesh is on track to become in 2026) highlighting similar issues for international agencies in partnering at the national level. A complementary/collaborative model between international actors and national and local actors is most common in newly emerging middle and low-middle-income countries; the role of international response 'should be to support, enhance and work alongside these existing domestic response capacities'. [61] However, tensions between international agencies and Government agencies and shifting power and control of humanitarian delivery are potential problems. [62]

❶ Coordination challenges proliferating funding gaps

Poor coordination and insufficient humanitarian financing are linked. Recent appeals in Bangladesh have received significantly less funding than hoped or anticipated. A Start Fund Bangladesh study of humanitarian funding flows showed the downward trajectory of funding to plans from 2017 to 2020, despite increasing need (see Figure 7). Moreover, the 2024 Joint Response Plan (JRP) for the Rohingya Refugee response was only 35% funded as of July 2024.

Figure 7: Total HRP Funding Appeal and Gap by Disaster (2016-2020)
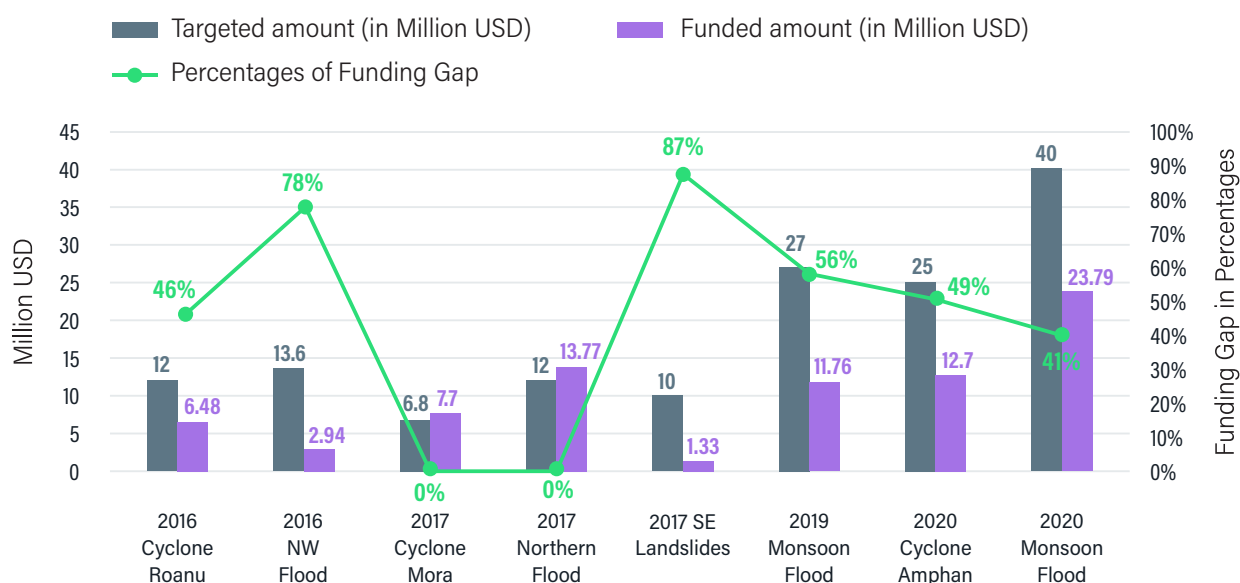
Source: UN OCHA FTS, HCTT Monitoring Dashboard and LTWG Financial Tracking Dashboard

The international humanitarian sector is facing a financial downturn, with projections suggesting an 11% decrease in funding between 2023 and 2024, despite growing needs[63] Further, Bangladesh's transition to middle-income status may reduce funding from foreign donors, with previous studies showing that the international financing system 'does not provide enough support to middle-income countries and the funds available to them are ill-suited to crisis response'.[64]

The GoB employs a multi-tiered funding system to finance disaster response, which includes: [65]

- The National Disaster Management Fund (NDMF) for finance preparedness, response and recovery related to natural disasters and emergency relief operations. The NDMF can also access contingency funds.

- Annual MoDMR budget allocations

- The Ministry of Finance contingency fund which can be used to channel relief assistance to vulnerable households via a social safety net program

However, there are no mechanisms to link the GoB's identified needs and financing gaps with the HCTT's identified needs and financing gaps as captured and reported in Humanitarian Response Plans.

> " [the] Government has its own way of resourcing and how it will respond to the crisis. The government and the partner should do the resource mobilising part together. But in reality the government uses its own tools and fundings, they do not step forward to invite the development or institutional donors. [International Humanitarian Actor] [66]

In 2024, Bangladesh's National Disaster Risk Financing Strategy (NDRFS) estimated that Bangladesh will face an average annual financial impact of approximately $3.2 billion due to natural hazards (cyclones and floods). Despite the mechanisms and proactive disaster risk financing solutions outlined above, the GoB forecasts finance gaps for responses to future disaster events. The institutional framework for the NDRFS aims to overcome coordination problems in disaster financing, including to:

- **Define clear roles and responsibilities:** Clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of various government agencies, NGOs, private sector entities and communities in implementing the strategy, and;

- **Strengthen coordination and collaboration:** establish mechanisms for effective coordination and collaboration among different stakeholders at national, regional and local levels.[67]

Impact of coordination challenges and funding gaps on crisis-affected populations

Coordination inefficiencies lead to delays in undertaking and signing off on needs assessments, thereby delaying assistance for crisis-affected populations.

Reductions in humanitarian financing, including those related to Bangladesh's increasing wealth, reduce the number of people that can be reached in crises as well as the services and support they receive. One stakeholder reflected on this issue.

> There is certainly some development but when we go to the field, we see that the people in the disaster-prone area, or the actual vulnerable people still don't have much improvement or resilience capacity. [...] One of the reasons may be that, as we have said that our country has developed, we did not get the amount of funds necessary for the work. [...] from my field experience, I could not meet the needs identified. For example, when there were a hundred people in need, but I could only reach twenty-five.[68] [Sub-National Government Official]

> Another thing is that we shifted thirty thousand people to Bhasan Char to lessen the load. There is not much funding opportunity in Bhasan Char. There are buildings, they can stay in them, but there is no food nor gas.[69] [International Humanitarian Actor]

Participants also spoke about the limitations on some sectors and services. For example, in the JRP for the Rohingya response, critical sectors including shelter, education, protection and health received less than 15% of the funding required to meet identified needs. Unmet needs exacerbate protection and security risks and heighten frustration within communities.[70]

What are the solutions?

Stakeholders suggested the following ways to strengthen coordination and better enable aligned and innovative financing in Bangladesh:

✔ **Create a more complementary approach to the international humanitarian system and GoB-led system at the national and sub-national levels**

– *GoB and HCTT partners* should work together to design an integrated, decentralised system to reduce duplication and inefficiencies in humanitarian action and coordination

– *Donors* should support the GoB and HCTT in undertaking a collective coordination design process.

✔ **Source and track humanitarian and disaster financing in line with the forthcoming 2024 NDRFS**

– *GoB and international and national humanitarian partners* should centralise the NDRFS in approaches to mobilising and tracking resources

– *GoB and international and national humanitarian partners* should leverage learning from other countries facing similar challenges in identifying new and innovative sources of disaster financing.

Create a more complementary approach

Stakeholders called for stronger integration between the HCTT system and the GoB-led system in a model that is synchronised yet also decentralised (see Priority 1). They suggested localised or area-based approaches that treat needs holistically, and providing multi-sector assistance.[71] Area-based approaches also enable greater participation and leadership from local and national actors and are more responsive and adaptable to the local context. Stakeholders suggested that the HCTT and Government should seek to create one integrated, decentralised system to reduce inefficiencies and confusion.

Graffiti in Tangail, Bangladesh after July 2024 revolution. Kryesmin / Wikimedia Commons

> HCTT is a cluster coordination mechanism in Bangladesh. There is a strong coordination system, it needs to be rethought – it needs to be one system that reports both to governments and international. HCTT etc. only coordinate the international one, on the other hand the Government only reports on the SOD. [Humanitarian Actor] [72]

Source and track humanitarian and disaster financing in line with the forthcoming 2024 NDRFS

More integrated and localised coordination and opportunities for improved financing are complementary, leading to the possibility of more effective use of resources in the context of growing needs. Stakeholders recognise that existing and forecast funding is unlikely to match growing demand, and new and different ways of working are required.

> The third [issue] is the resourcing. When we conduct the assessment, there remains a target to do the resourcing on the basis of the assessment. [The] Government has its own way of resourcing and how it will respond to the crisis. The government and the partner should do the resource mobilising part together. But in reality, the government uses its own tools and fundings, they do not step forward to invite the development or institutional donors. They have said it informally but not formally. [Humanitarian Actor] [73]

The HCTT recognises the resourcing challenge and need to work with other stakeholders, with notes from the April meeting pointing to the need to 'mobilise funding from private and public sectors, expanding beyond traditional donors'.[74] This is not new, with existing moves in 2021 to create a specific private sector working group and introductory brief for private sector[75] organisations seeking to support disaster response in Bangladesh, but it is not clear if this group remains active. However, Bangladesh can learn from other countries' experience with private sector collaboration in large emergencies, such as the Philippines' response to Typhoon Haiyan in 2014.

Humanitarian stakeholders in Bangladesh can use the draft NDRFS to galvanise thinking and working differently. They can also learn how other countries have utilised community-level fundraising sources and integrated these into national funding mechanisms. For example, Baznas is an Indonesian government agency that collects, distributes and manages *zakat* financing, and which promotes a sustainable and programmatic approach in line with the SDGs.[76]

What are the issues?

Bangladesh has a long history of advancing resilience through nexus approaches, with examples of community-based preparedness and early warning initiatives evident from at least 1973. At the policy level, integration between humanitarian action, disaster risk reduction, poverty and environmental protection has been endorsed the GoB's five-year development plan (2011-2016).[77] Further, the history of an evolving approach to the nexus based on learning from emergencies is evident. For example, with support from UKAID, the GoB designed and implemented the 'Char Livelihood programme' between 2004-2010 in five districts of Northwest Bangladesh. The programme worked with extremely poor households with no safety nets, supporting their engagement in livelihoods activities, providing capability building, and cash for work to raise households above the flooding line.[78]

Box 5: Defining the nexus

This paper uses 'nexus' as a shorthand term for the connections between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding approaches. It follows the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee definition:

A 'nexus approach' refers to the aim of strengthening collaboration, coherence and complementarity. The approach seeks to capitalise on the comparative advantages of each pillar – to the extent of their relevance in the specific context – in order to reduce overall vulnerability and the number of unmet needs, strengthen risk management capacities and address root causes of conflict.[79]

❶ Disjointed nexus thinking and action

Whilst the UN has made progress in Bangladesh in formalising international collaboration across the nexus on disaster management, in the international system this process is mostly led by humanitarian actors. The HCTT in Bangladesh developed the Nexus Strategy for Climate-related Disasters 2021-2025 as a humanitarian preparedness and response strategy to support the National Plan for Disaster Management (NPDM) 2021-2025 and to complement the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) for Bangladesh in relevant areas. In line with the international best practice, risk financing, preparedness, and response have been tailored to Bangladesh using the Strategic Preparedness for Response and Resilience to Disaster (SPEED) approach. This approach however does not acknowledge nor build on Bangladesh experience in nexus approaches and has been critiqued as being a theoretical approach and not representing the entirety of the disaster risk reduction work being done in Bangladesh.[80]

Despite these examples, humanitarian, development and peace programming (the 'triple nexus') in Bangladesh have largely been carried out in parallel. For example, in Cox's Bazar, most humanitarian assistance focuses on refugees in the camps. The JRP for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis includes a strategic objective on support to host communities in the two sub-districts surrounding the camps. Following its revisions due to COVID-19, it targeted more people in the host community (953,000) than refugees (860,000). Meeting the differing needs of the host and refugee communities remains hard (see Figure 8). Short-term humanitarian relief is insufficient to meet the structural development needs of the host community.

Figure 8: Diverse needs of different populations
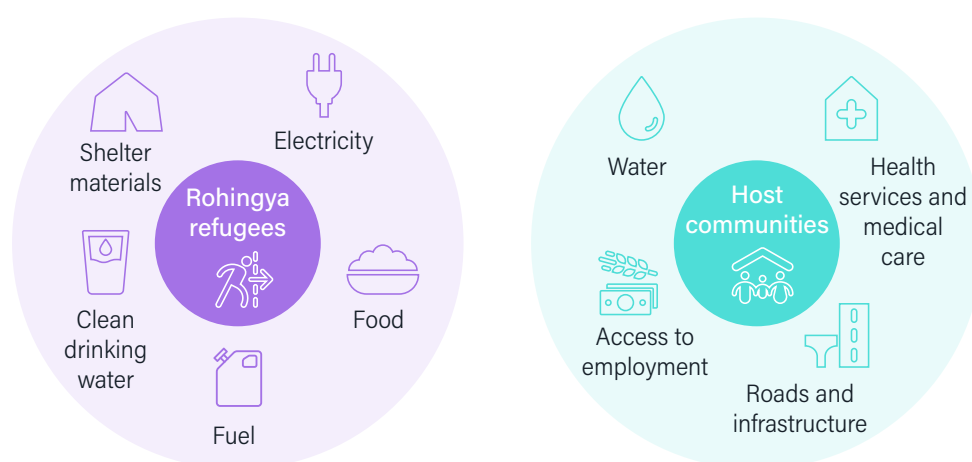
Source: Inter Sector Coordination Group, 2020. 2020 Joint response plan: Rohingya humanitarian crisis. Page 16.

Multilateral development banks (MDBs) and government donors are seeking to rectify this situation by providing development assistance to improve infrastructure, local government capacity for public service delivery, and social safety nets, largely outside of the JRP. The delay in the approval of the District Development and Growth Plan (DDGP) and a lack of subnational reporting on development activities make it difficult to integrate programming in Cox's Bazar district across the humanitarian–development nexus (see Box 5).

> **Our primary demand is to construct embankments to prevent flooding. Without it, we face this disaster repeatedly, and we don't want a life dependent on aid. Proper embankments and drainage systems are essential [Flood-Affected Community Member].**[81]

❶ Short-term thinking for long-term issues

Stakeholders reflected on the challenges for both humanitarian and development actors in meeting the long-term needs for refugee and host communities in the absence of a multi-year strategy, which has not been a political priority for the GoB. The UN in Bangladesh, with technical leadership by UNDP, and the World Bank are supporting the GoB to formulate the DDGP for Cox's Bazar, which could fill the strategic gap in development assistance in the district. A change in leadership presents an opportunity for a revised strategic approach to the long-term needs of both host and refugee communities.

> **the preparedness or development projects should be created keeping in mind that it does not trigger any other vulnerabilities to our environment. A long-term vision must be kept. [Humanitarian Actor].**[82]

❶ Limiting space for local leadership

The disconnects between development programs and disaster management and humanitarian strategies and interventions deter local actor participation and leadership. Local and national NGOs have longstanding experience in building community resilience and reducing disaster risk in Bangladesh. For them, accessing international development funding remains hard, with little transparency on funding received indirectly (although efforts to rectify this are ongoing).[83] Few financing mechanisms fund local and national NGOs to support longer-term recovery in terms of DM or to meet development needs in Cox's Bazar district. Bilateral development donors have also deepened their partnerships with the local government in the Cox's Bazar district following the influx of Rohingya refugees. The engagement of international actors with local and national NGOs in the district is mostly framed in humanitarian terms, with little funding available for development needs.

❗ Leaning into operational integration

In the absence of collective buy-in for a strategic approach to the nexus, integrated approaches at the operational and programmatic level seek to drive collective impact and formalise collaboration across sectors. For example, one study found that joint programming approaches, such as the Safe Access to Fuel and Energy Plus Livelihoods program (see below on the second phase, SAFE+2), limit the risk of overlap across humanitarian and development actors and meet both immediate and long-term needs.[84]

Box 6: Integrated programming approaches to put the nexus into action[85]

The SAFE+2 program was developed in 2018 following the identification that natural resources, including forests and ecosystems in Cox's Bazar, were under significant pressure due to the number of Rohingya refugees. Refugees' harvesting of wood for cooking emitting an estimated 655,000 tons of CO_2 annually. This also caused respiratory problems, health and nutritional harm, and increased risk of GBV. A collaboration of agencies and funders launched the SAFE Plus program, focusing on three integrated areas of intervention, being:

1. Enabling access to cleaner energy for 190,000 refugees

2. Rehabilitating and protecting the degraded environment, benefiting 167,000 refugee and host community members

3. Increasing resilience among 50,000 refugee and 50,000 host community households.

Impact of siloed, short-term approaches to meeting inter-connected needs of crisis-affected populations

The lack of nexus service provision is exacerbating existing inequalities, primarily for residents of Cox's Bazar. Given the prolonged periods of response and recovery due to the political prioritisation of the prospects of Rohingya repatriation to Myanmar over other alternatives, there is a cascading effect on access to schools and livelihoods for these communities and on future development and wellbeing.

This is most acutely observed in the disconnect between disaster preparedness and urban planning. Of particular concern is the erosion of existing infrastructure and the poor quality of new infrastructure, increasing residents' vulnerability to flooding, cyclones and storm surges. Community drinking water is scarce, and drainage problems severe.

❝ Some days ago, we had a record 610 millimetres of rain. And the whole Cox's Bazar got clogged. What is the reason? The drainage system. If the calculations are not done properly in a slope, the drainage won't be proper and everything will be clogged.[86] [Cox' Bazar Host Community Member]

Both host and refugee communities consulted in Cox's Bazar criticised the lack of long-term solutions to the protracted crisis. Treating the situation with a short-term response posture maintains Rohingyas in a precarious situation, entirely dependent on camp assistance for basic needs, unable to build permanent shelter or venture outside of camps. Over the years, humanitarian actors have deplored a rise in security and protection issues in the camps, while living conditions for host communities have also deteriorated. Some interviewees linked the deterioration of living conditions in host communities to the rise in civil unrest in the district.

> **"** The generation that is going to respond to the emergencies in the near future is currently in school. And some of these people are getting out of the school because of displacement from being in the flood or affected zones....we are just not preparing the people who are going to be the leaders in the future. [Humanitarian Actor] [87]

Outside Cox's Bazar, at-risk communities reflected on their requests for support to reduce risks related to landslides. Without DRR support landslides destroy their homes, after which (ironically) they receive support for temporary shelter.

> **"** We are temporarily settled on uneven terrain, living on cut edges of hillsides, and our biggest problem is landslides. When we submit landslide complaints, they are only addressed after incidents occur. It would be better if preventive measures were taken before the rainy season. [Flood-Affected Community Member] [88]

What are the solutions?

Stakeholders identified the following ways to connect development and humanitarian issues in Bangladesh:

✔ **Advocate for durable solutions during joined-up diplomatic engagement with the GoB**

  – ***Donors and international humanitarian actors*** should engage with the GoB to overcome political obstacles to sustainable solutions to the Rohingya refugee crisis

  – ***The GoB*** should consider the window of opportunity of a change in leadership to revisit policies that undermine the sustainability of support to Rohingya refugees

✔ **Replicate joint programming for stronger coordination between donors and greater coherence between implementers**

  – ***Donors and international and national humanitarian actors*** should work collectively to implement joint programming approaches, building on success and leveraging learning from ongoing initiatives

✔ **Connect the localisation and locally led development agendas within a nexus approach to unlock further support for local and national actors**

  – ***International actors*** should work collectively to create space and opportunity for local and national actors through consortia models that reduce duplication

  – ***International and local and national actors*** should advocate to donors for longer-term funding windows that are accessible to local and national actors and actively facilitate linkages towards development and humanitarian funding windows

✔ **Strategically align funding needs and streams with joined-up approaches.**

  – ***Donors*** should ensure support aligns with the NDRFS to build transparency on development efforts and needs in Cox's Bazar district to improve coordination and complementarity with humanitarian funding.

Advocate for durable solutions during joined-up diplomatic engagement with the GoB

Facilitate durable solutions to protracted crises. Bilateral donors, MDBs and UN agencies should engage with the Bangladesh government to overcome political obstacles to sustainable solutions to the Rohingya refugee crisis. Structural needs in host and refugee communities in Cox's Bazar district are growing and thwarting socioeconomic development and cannot be met fully by humanitarian assistance alone.

Replicate joint programming for stronger coordination between donors and greater coherence between implementers

A study on humanitarian response in middle-income countries found that *'In middle-income countries, the needs of those affected by crisis often intersect with the needs of other vulnerable communities. As a result, humanitarian response in middle-income countries should work together with development efforts. This will involve responding to the needs of refugees/affected populations and host communities and supporting existing services'.*[89] This resonates strongly with the context of the Rohingya refugee situation in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh.

In the absence of shared planning frameworks for the Rohingya refugee response, joint programming across humanitarian and development objectives is an effective means to operationalise coordination and planning between multiple donors and implementers. Such arrangements enable donors to incentivise planning across collective outcomes and according to the respective implementers' areas of expertise. Joint programming in Cox's Bazar district has enabled multiple UN agencies to combine their sectoral expertise to slow deforestation, improve livelihoods and meet fuel needs in the refugee and host communities. Similar initiatives could be established in other sectors in dialogue with the ISCG and the respective line ministries. Potential areas of synergy for humanitarian and development actors include shock-responsive social protection; livelihoods, agriculture and food security; and DM and climate resilience.

Connect the localisation and locally led development agendas within a nexus approach to unlock further support for local and national actors

Bangladesh offers both opportunities and challenges for increased engagement of development actors with local and national NGOs and the private sector. Humanitarian assistance with a longer timeframe could overcome some of the key challenges to a localised crisis response and recovery by, for example, providing designated funding for capacity building. To avoid a proliferation of implementing partners for individual donors, assistance to local and national NGOs could be provided through intermediary funding mechanisms such as pooled funds or by increasing support to NGO consortia. Consortia of international and local and national NGOs can facilitate knowledge exchange between participating organisations and reassure risk-averse donors by including both trusted and new partners. Bilateral donors, MDBs and UN agencies should deepen their engagement with the local government in Cox's Bazar district to help it cope with the refugee crisis.

Strategically align funding needs and streams with joined-up approaches

Bilateral development donors and MDBs need to ensure that sufficient funds from their support for national development programs reach people affected by the refugee crisis in Cox's Bazar district. While several donors have targeted some of their development assistance sub-nationally to the district since 2018, it remains fragmented and is perceived to be insufficient to meet structural development needs. There must be more transparency on development efforts and needs in Cox's Bazar district to facilitate better targeting of development funds, enable mutual accountability processes with the GoB, and improve coordination and complementarity with humanitarian funding. Humanitarian funders and fundraisers should also coordinate their approaches with development goals, in line with the sustained and long-term view outlined in the NDRFS.[90] This includes" *'Align the DRF strategy with national development plans and other relevant initiatives: Ensure coherence and synergies between the DRF strategy and broader development goals.'* [91]

July 2024 Revolution graffiti at Dhaka city. DeloarAkram / Wikimedia Commons

SECTION 4: CONCLUSION

The story of Bangladesh shows momentum and appetite for a collective approach to meeting humanitarian reform priorities in the context of the change in government. The recent political shifts present an opportunity for change, but the transition period is complex, with stakeholders seeking stability within and from the GoB. This rapid review acknowledges that disaster management and humanitarian response is complex with diverse and intersecting needs. Several themes were discernible across the four priority areas: strengthened accountability and transparency; investment, support and space for local leaders to be able to lead; coordinated collective approaches to meeting immediate and long-term needs; and centralising community voices.

> Now [the change in government] is a good opportunity for the international partners to come forth and help us in the areas we just discussed. And if only one comes to help, it won't be enough, we need a few at least. We can take their help in editing, refining and revising [DM policy and procedures]. This is a good opportunity for them to ensure transparency, accountability and community engagement. [Humanitarian Actor] [92]

We have highlighted the divergent perspectives on the Government of Bangladesh's appetite for reform at this time. Despite this, there is scope for humanitarian actors to support the country's leadership in progressing priorities, and specific ways in which stakeholders can work together to improve the structure, functioning, and ways of working to meet the needs of affected populations in the immediate and medium terms. Whilst the list of priorities for the transitional and incoming government is long, the solutions and actions put forward in this review can form a pathway to strengthen humanitarian response and disaster management at all levels effectively and in a timely manner (summarised in Figure 9 below).

Figure 9: List of key issues and solutions and actions

PRIORITY 1: DECENTRALISATION AND ELEVATION OF LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Key issues

- ❗ **Centralised power and decision-making leads to institutional ineffectiveness and lack of transparency in humanitarian funding and resource allocations**
- ❗ **The diversity of response contexts and hazards, such as heatwaves, cyclones and population movements requires contextualised and nuanced mechanisms that are not possible with a one-size-fits-all model**
- ❗ **Boundaries between administrative, political and disaster response functions within Government are blurred, resulting in corruption and diversion of aid**
- ❗ **Mechanisms allowing crisis-affected populations to report abuse of power by Government and non-government representatives safely are absent**
- ❗ **Local actors have limited space and opportunity to participate and lead.**

Solutions and actions

- ✔ **Separate political and operational functions and improve independence about roles to prevent political interference, coupled with transparent and independent accountability mechanisms**
  - *The GoB* should revisit the SOD to clarify roles and mitigate the risk of political influence and establish independent monitoring mechanisms
  - *International and national humanitarian actors* should advocate for a participatory, transparent revision process
  - *Donors* should provide financial support to the GoB to undertake the process, if required.

- ✔ **Initiate bottom-up decentralised approaches to disaster management grounded in local contextual realities and leadership**
  - In revisiting the SOD, the *GoB* should consider the decentralisation of decision making from the Dhaka level to the ward, union and upazila levels, with consideration given to the Chattogram Hill Tracts' governance context
  - *International and national humanitarian actors* should continue to seek opportunities to elevate community perspectives in decision making, including their role in influencing a revised SOD.

PRIORITY 2: DISASTER MANAGEMENT PROFESSIONALISATION AND STRENGTHENING DATA MANAGEMENT

Key issues

- **Inadequate technical capability and competence of officials responsible for disaster management, including due to the limited impact of existing capacity building approaches, limits effective needs assessment and prioritisation**

- **Low capacity among district and sub-district DM sections to collect and manage data means needs assessments are not timely or reliable**

- **Inability to adapt humanitarian standards prevents humanitarian actors from meeting the needs of diverse groups**

- **Lack of diversity and inclusion of youth and women in Government DM operation staff.**

Possible solutions and actions

- **Systematically build disaster management and response technical expertise and competencies among government (district and sub-district) and local humanitarian actors – including on protection, gender and inclusion**

  - *The GoB* should review national approaches to DM capacity building and elevating the importance of DM capability

  - *The GoB* should strengthen DDM's expertise and capacity as a technical hub for DM

  - *International and national humanitarian actors* and donors should support the GoB in undertaking the review and, ensuring collective buy in, application of learning and resources. They should also support capacity building initiatives with a focus on strengthening DDM's expertise.

- **Strengthen capacities and systems to collect, analyse, store and manage disaggregated data in an accountable, transparent and efficient way among government district and sub-district DM sections**

  - *The GoB* should invest in data management capabilities and systems, linked to the process of reviewing the SOD and separating operational and political functions

  - *International and national humanitarian actors* should advocate to the GoB for stronger systems and processes for collecting and managing data transparently, as well as integrating data into capability building initiatives (as suggested above).

PRIORITY 3: EFFECTIVE COORDINATION AND INNOVATIVE FINANCING

Key issues

- **The government system, governed by the SOD, and humanitarian system (i.e the HCTT) operate in parallel, causing confusion and inefficiencies between actors. Inefficient coordination also leads to gaps in fully understanding needs and how to meet them**

- **Underfunded humanitarian plans mean the needs of affected populations remain unmet**

- **International humanitarian funding is likely to decrease after the country's graduation to developing country status in 2031. Innovative solutions are required to reduce gaps.**

Possible solutions and actions

✔ **Create a more complementary approach to the international humanitarian system and the GoB-led system at the national and sub-national levels**

- *The GoB and HCTT partners* should work together to design an integrated, decentralised system to reduce duplication and inefficiencies in humanitarian action and coordination

- *Donors* should support the GoB and HCTT in undertaking a collective coordination design process.

✔ **Source and track humanitarian and disaster financing in line with the forthcoming 2024 NDRFS**

- *The GoB and international and national humanitarian partners* should centralise the NDRFS in approaches to mobilising and tracking resources

- *The GoB and international and national humanitarian partners* should leverage learning from other countries facing similar challenges in identifying new and innovative sources of disaster financing.

PRIORITY 4: ALL EYES ON THE HORIZON: LONG-TERM THINKING ACROSS THE NEXUS

Key issues

- ❶ Despite Bangladesh's evolving history of nexus approaches to strengthen resilience, humanitarian, development and peace programming continue to be largely carried out in parallel in Cox's Bazar
- ❶ Disconnects between approaches to addressing humanitarian and development issues cohesively limit space and funding for local and national actors
- ❶ The absence of cohesive approaches exacerbates inequalities for communities, and significantly limits opportunity for them into the future

Possible solutions and actions

- ✔ **Advocate for durable solutions during joined-up diplomatic engagement with the GoB**
  - – *Donors and international humanitarian actors* should engage with the GoB to overcome political obstacles to sustainable solutions to the Rohingya refugee crisis
  - – *The GoB* should consider the window of opportunity of a change in leadership to revisit policies that undermine the sustainability of support to Rohingya refugees.

- ✔ **Replicate joint programming for stronger coordination between donors and greater coherence between implementers**
  - – *Donors and international and national humanitarian actors* should work collectively to implement joint programming approaches, building on success and leveraging learning from ongoing initiatives

- ✔ **Connect the localisation and locally led development agendas within a nexus approach to unlock further support for local and national actors**
  - – *International actors* should work collectively to create space and opportunity for local and national actors through consortia models that reduce duplication
  - – *International and local and national actors* should advocate to donors for longer-term funding windows that are accessible to local and national actors and actively facilitate linkages towards development and humanitarian funding windows.

- ✔ **Strategically align funding needs and streams with joined-up approaches**
  - – *Donors* should ensure support aligns with the NDRFS to build transparency on development efforts and needs in Cox's Bazar district to improve coordination and complementarity with humanitarian funding

ANNEX 1: RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Research questions	Lines of enquiry	Data sources
Overarching research question: *How can the humanitarian system in the current political climate in Bangladesh shift to better meet the needs of current and future populations affected by crisis?*	▪ Previous challenges that present opportunities for positive change in the future ▪ Key underlying conditions for positive change to happen (addressing the likelihood and feasibility questions) ▪ The extent to which various opportunities are likely to lead to significant positive change for affected populations	▪ Rapid desk review ▪ KIIs with humanitarian actors ▪ KIIs with national government actors (operational and political) ▪ KIIs with regional and international actors ▪ Consultations with affected communities
Sub question 1: *What systemic, political and relationship challenges have humanitarian actors faced in providing meaningful and appropriate support to affected populations in Bangladesh under the previous regime?*	▪ Evidence of limiting policies and political decisions preventing humanitarian action over the last 5 years ▪ Evidence of disconnects or gaps in the relational and/or structure of the national government and humanitarian system ▪ Evidence of the impacts of policies and political decisions on crisis-affected populations ▪ Other significant barriers for humanitarian actors in meeting the needs of affected populations in the political context of Bangladesh over the last 5 years (e.g. in relation to the definition of needs, access to funding…)	▪ Rapid desk review ▪ KIIs with humanitarian actors ▪ KIIs with national government actors (operational only) ▪ KIIs with regional and international actors
Sub question 2: *What systemic, political and relational opportunities exist for humanitarian stakeholders within the context of the change in government in Bangladesh?*	▪ Challenges and reform areas that humanitarian, government and affected communities expressed most interest in addressing ▪ Examples of other challenges which may not have been identified as priorities but evidence suggests can drive significant positive change ▪ Cross-cutting themes that humanitarian, government and affected communities are most interested in seeing progress (e.g. localisation, AAP, Gender equality, social inclusion…)	▪ Rapid desk review ▪ KIIs with humanitarian actors ▪ KIIs with national government actors ((operational and political) ▪ KIIs with regional and international actors ▪ Consultations with affected communities

Sub question 3:		
What key steps can actors at various levels (government, international and national humanitarian actors) take to collectively move forward to better provide meaningful and appropriate support to affected populations across Bangladesh?	▪ Practical steps that are necessary for humanitarian actors and government actors to size new opportunities for change in the short and longer term ▪ Ways to facilitate and accelerate collective action for sustainable change, including from other regional and international actors	▪ Rapid desk review ▪ KIIs with humanitarian actors ▪ KIIs with national government actors ▪ KIIs with regional and international actors ▪ Consultations with affected communities ▪ Validation workshop with national stakeholders

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