

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | JANUARY 2025



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Cover image: Graffiti in Rajshahi, Bangladesh after July 2024 revolution. ManikDas1122 / Wikimedia Commons. *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. A term used by the country's prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, against the protesters in 2024.'*

Appreciations: The research team would like to thank all the interviewees, including key government and civil society actors shaping the humanitarian system in Bangladesh. The research team would also like to thank the team at the United Kingdom Humanitarian Innovation Hub (UKHIH), without whom this study would have been impossible.

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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.

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



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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

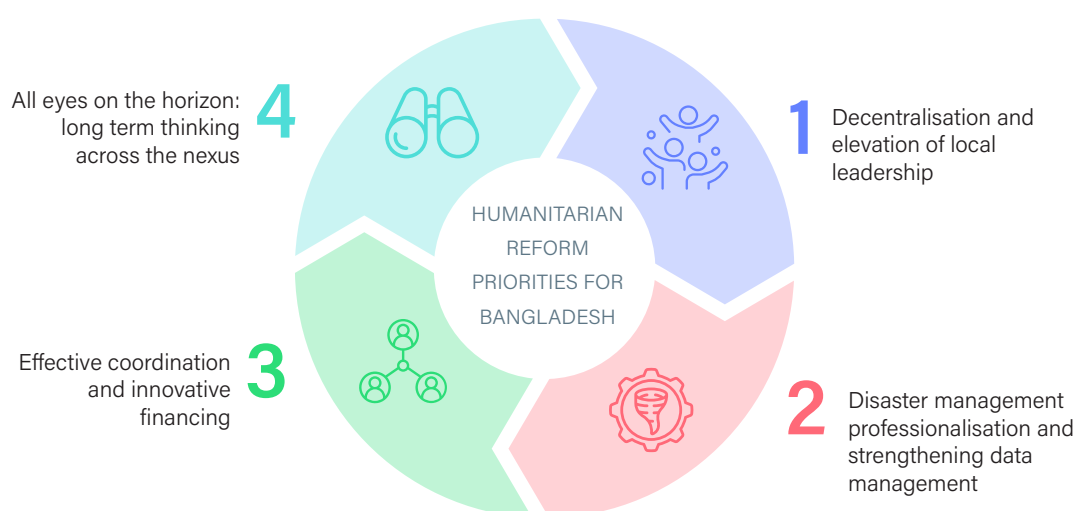
The January 2024 parliamentary elections in Bangladesh marked a significant transition to a dominant-party political system, with the Awami League securing another five-year term amid an opposition boycott. However, subsequent anti-government protests led to the resignation of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024, creating a period of political, economic, and security uncertainty under an interim government. This evolving political crisis poses critical implications for the humanitarian system in Bangladesh, as it depends on national and sub-national systems, partnerships, and political dynamics to effectively respond to the needs of crisis-affected populations.

We explore opportunities for the humanitarian sector to strengthen systems, processes, and partnerships to better address the challenges and opportunities emerging from Bangladesh's shifting political landscape.

Priorities in Humanitarian Reform in Bangladesh

We have highlighted the divergent perspectives on the Government of Bangladesh's appetite for reform now. 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. 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.

Figure: Summary of humanitarian priorities in Bangladesh



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

- ❶ 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
- ❷ Low capacity among district and sub-district DM sections to collect and manage data means needs assessments are not timely or reliable
- ❸ Inability to adapt humanitarian standards prevents humanitarian actors from meeting the needs of diverse groups
- ❹ 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 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 capacity building initiatives (as suggested above)



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



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



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



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



Key issues

- ❗ 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
- ❗ Disconnects between approaches to addressing humanitarian and development issues cohesively limit space and funding for local and national actors
- ❗ 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.

This report is the first in a series of reviews conducted by the Humanitarian Advisory Group under the Humanitarian Rapid Research Initiative (HRRI), commissioned and supported by the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub (UKHIH) and funded by UK International Development from the UK government.