

UNHCR Partnership Practices and Undermining of Local Capacity in Rohingya Response

Background

The Rohingya crisis remains one of the world's largest and most protracted humanitarian emergencies. Over one million Rohingya refugees currently live in camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, after fleeing persecution and violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State, particularly following the mass displacement in August 2017. Local communities and organizations were the first responders at the onset of the crisis, and since then, local, national, and international NGOs have continued to play crucial roles in providing humanitarian support.

Evidence shows that partnerships with local NGOs and CSOs not only strengthen community ownership but also significantly reduce operational costs. However, several evaluations indicate that local NGOs often feel they are not treated as respected and equal partners by UN agencies and international NGOs. In many cases, international organizations have executed projects directly in the Rohingya camps without forming meaningful partnerships with local actors. More recently, a noticeable decline in partnership opportunities for local organizations has been observed. For instance, UNHCR has reportedly discontinued partnerships with all local NGOs for the 2026–2029 partnership cycle, further marginalizing local actors in the response.

Definition of Local NGO: Local, National and International NGOs definitions have been taken from Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) localization marker 24 January 2018. It says that:

Local NGOs/CSOs: Local NGOs/CSOs operating in a specific, geographically defined, subnational area of an aid recipient country, without affiliation to an international NGO/CSO. And the local NGO also defines as the organization originated in a local community and grown up

with the local leadership is considered as local NGO. For example, Mukti, COAST, Nongor, PHALS, Jago Nari, AGROJATRA etc. in Cox's Bazar district. The organization whose leader birth place is Cox's Bazar, or the organization who is originated in Cox's Bazar or whose headquarter is based on Cox's Bazar.

National NGOs/civil society organisations

(CSOs): National NGOs/CSOs operating in the aid recipient country in which they are headquartered, working in multiple subnational regions, and not affiliated to an international NGO. The NGO have countrywide operation only in Bangladesh is considered as national NGO. For example- BLAST, BDRCS, Bandhu BD, CODEC, CNRS, friendship, Gonoshasthaya Kendra, NGO Forum etc.

International NGO: The NGO have presence at least two or more than two national boundaries and working in a country as an international federation member is considered as INGO. For instance, Acted, Action Aid, BRAC, HI, etc.

This is mentioned that the UNHCR Localization guideline has also been prepared aligning with the IASC definition.

What is mentioned in the UNHCR Guidelines on Localization?

In 2024, UNHCR published a guideline named **"UNHCR Guidelines on Localization – Engaging and Partnering with Local and National Actors"**. The UNHCR Guidelines on Localization outline several key commitments regarding partnership and funding for Local and National Actors (LNAs), including Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), to operationalize the principle of **"as local as possible, as international as necessary"**

Definition of Localization: UNHCR guideline acknowledge that Local/National Actors (LNAs) have a deep understanding of the local and national context, culture, and dynamics, along with valuable networks at local and national levels, easy access to crisis-affected population, including forcibly displaced people, and strong technical expertise. This enables them to effectively identify and address the needs, priorities, and protection risks of forcibly displaced and stateless people, as well as host communities, in an efficient and contextually appropriate manner. They are often the first to respond to an emergency and stay on when international actors leave. Collaborating closely with LNAs is therefore essential for ensuring sustainable responses.

UNHCR's localization framework is built on achieving equitable and quality partnerships with LNAs. The key commitments include:

UNHCR Localization Key Aspect:

- 1. Principle-Based Partnership:** Committing to the global agreements such as the **Grand Bargain (2017)** and the **Principles of Partnership (2007)** to enhance more equitable and substantive partnerships. And recognizing and valuing local actors as **equal partners**, and ensuring partnerships are characterized by a shift in power and resources to LNAs.
- 2. Strengthening Local Leadership:** Reinforcing LNAs' **leadership and decision-making power** and ensuring risk-sharing rather than unintentionally sidelining or overpowering them. **Prioritized Modalities:** Prioritizing partnership selection and implementation modalities that support the **development and strengthening of national systems** and the efforts of LNAs for sustainable and impactful responses.
- 3. Capacity-Sharing and Decision Making:** UNHCR is committing to two-way capacity-sharing to reinforce and strengthen existing LNA capacities. UNHCR is also committed to increase funding to LNAs (25% Grand Bargain target), ensure two-way capacity-sharing, strengthen leadership, ownership and meaningful participation in decision-making processes, and build stronger, more equitable collaboration and partnerships between LNAs and international actors.
- 4. How is UNHCR advancing the localization:** According to UNHCR, there are many ways of advancing localization. For localization to succeed, the following four key enabling factors are necessary:
 - Championing by senior management
 - Mindset of UNHCR personnel
 - Long-term localization plans
 - Supportive systems and structures
- 5. Key Commitments on Funding:** The commitments on funding aim to increase resources, improve the quality of financial engagement, and manage risk appropriately for LNAs.
- 6. Risk Acceptance:** According to localization guideline, UNHCR will accept a **higher level of residual risk** for some LNAs, particularly those with weaker internal controls like fiduciary controls, recognizing the benefits of localization.
- 7. UNHCR Don't List for Local National Actors:** UNHCR also listed some actions not to behave with LNAs.
 - Don't make assumptions about LNAs' capacities.
 - Don't make LNAs feel less valuable or a cost-saving option.
 - Don't reinforce existing power imbalances within local humanitarian structures.

UNHCR's Localization vs. the Reality in Cox's Bazar

According to UNHCR's Localization Report (2024), 87% of its funded partners were categorized as Local and National Actors (LNAs), and as of June 2025, this stood at 85%.

However, this reported progress sharply contradicts the partnership decisions for 2026. For the 2026–2029 partnership cycle in the Rohingya refugee response, UNHCR Bangladesh has selected 13 partners, of them 5 International NGOs, 7 National NGOs, and 1 government authority. Notably, none of the selected NGOs are local organizations from Cox's Bazar.

This means that UNHCR will have 0% direct funding partnerships with local NGOs in Cox's Bazar in 2026, despite more than seven years of collaboration with UNHCR, where many local organizations have demonstrated capacity, operational experience, contextual understanding, and a strong track record in service delivery.

This decision contradicts UNHCR's own localization commitments and undermines the very local actors who have been at the frontline with UNHCR since the beginning of the crisis.

Local NGO/Actor Contributions in the Rohingya Refugee Response in Cox's Bazar

Local actors and NGOs in Cox's Bazar have played a critical and multifaceted role in the Rohingya humanitarian response since the 2017 influx, often serving as the frontline responders and helping maintain social cohesion between the refugee and host communities. COAST Foundation, a long-standing member of the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN – www.aprrn.org) for more than two decades, has consistently advocated for refugee rights in the region. Immediately after the influx, COAST mobilized its own resources to provide life-saving relief in Ukhiya and Teknaf, including hot meals, safe water, and essential maternal and child health services.

Like several other local partners previously supported by UNHCR, COAST has made significant contributions to the response since 2018, particularly in promoting social cohesion. COAST co-founded and has been leading the Cox's Bazar CSO-

NGO Forum (CCNF – www.cxb-cso-ngo.org), a coalition of local NGOs working to ensure that humanitarian response strategies are inclusive and respectful of both refugee and host community needs. Over the last eight years, COAST and CCNF have organized multiple advocacy campaigns and dialogues, without external donor funding, to promote Rohingya refugee rights at district, national, and regional levels, which is also consistent with the core principles of UNHCR's mandate. COAST has also continuously engaged media and civil society to keep the issue visible and uphold a rights-based humanitarian approach. Some of the events are-

1. COAST and CCNF events on the eve of World Refugee Day: **20 June 2018**
<https://coastbd.net/%E0%A6%95%E0%A6%95%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%B8%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%B8%E0%A6%A6%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%87-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%B6%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%AC-%E0%A6%B6%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%A3/>
2. Film Show on Rohingya Genocide in Ukhiya and Teknaf in 2018
<https://coastbd.net/film-show-on-rohingya-genocide-in-ukhiya-and-teknaf-building-social-harmony-and-demand-for-justice/>
3. COAST and Samakal Round Table Discussion on World Refugee Day: **13 June 2019**
<https://coastbd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/1.8-Rohingya-Flyer-English-final-correction.pdf>
Bangla supplement:
<https://url-shortener.me/89MW>
<https://coastbd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Bangla-supplementary.pdf>
4. COAST Program in Regional Humanitarian Partnership Week **December 2023**, Bangkok, Thailand

<https://www.thefinancetoday.net/article/national/23442/The-Rohingya-crisis-the-ultimate-solution-lies-in-Myanmar>

5. COAST Program in Regional Humanitarian Partnership Week **December 2024**, Bangkok, Thailand

<https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/civil-society-calls-strengthened-rohingya-support-ahead-repatriation-1016141>

Who is the “Best fit partner”? Is that stance a stigma on Local Actors’ capacity?

UNHCR stated that some local organizations applying for partnership were “not the Best Fit Partner.” This raises a serious concern. After seven years of dedicated work and proven experience in the Rohingya response under UNHCR partnerships, how are these same organizations now considered “unfit”? Such a stance contradicts UNHCR’s own localization policy and undermines the Grand Bargain commitments, which emphasize capacity strengthening, equitable partnership, and recognition of local actors’ long-standing contributions, not questioning the capacity. This narrative of “capacity inadequacy” risks becoming a stigma against local actors and challenges the very spirit of locally-led humanitarian response.

It is time to take a principled stand. Therefore, we recommend

1. **Review and justify partnership decisions:** UNHCR’s recent partnership selection decisions must be reviewed in light of its localization commitments and publicly explained to ensure transparency and accountability.
2. **Apply differentiated standards:** UNHCR and other UN agencies should not evaluate local, national, and international NGOs using the same criteria. Capacity expectations must be

context-sensitive, with separate and appropriate benchmarks for local, national and international organizations.

3. **Fundraising role of INGOs:** International NGOs should raise funds from their country of origin, and should not compete with local organizations for domestic resources within Bangladesh.
4. **Publish a localization roadmap:** UNHCR should publicly disclose a clear Localization Roadmap and multi-year strategy outlining how local NGOs will progressively be included in partnerships.
5. **Allocate a minimum of 25% direct funding:** At least 25% of total UNHCR funding should be provided directly to local NGOs, with transparent and trackable reporting mechanisms.
6. **Ensure local actors’ participation in decision-making:** Local NGOs must be meaningfully involved in partnership selection processes, strategic planning, and other key decision-making spaces.
7. **Prioritize local actors to promote localization:** Certain national NGOs, specifically those that are imported from the Southern and Northern parts of Bangladesh in Rohingya response, should be excluded from UNHCR and other UN agencies’ partnerships to promote localization.
8. **Promote local leadership:** UN agencies and INGOs should actively support and strengthen local leadership instead of some invited national and international leadership.

References:

1. [UNHCR GUIDELINES ON LOCALIZATION: Engaging and Partnering with Local and National Actors](#)
2. https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/hfft_localisation_marker_definitions_aper_24_january_2018.pdf



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