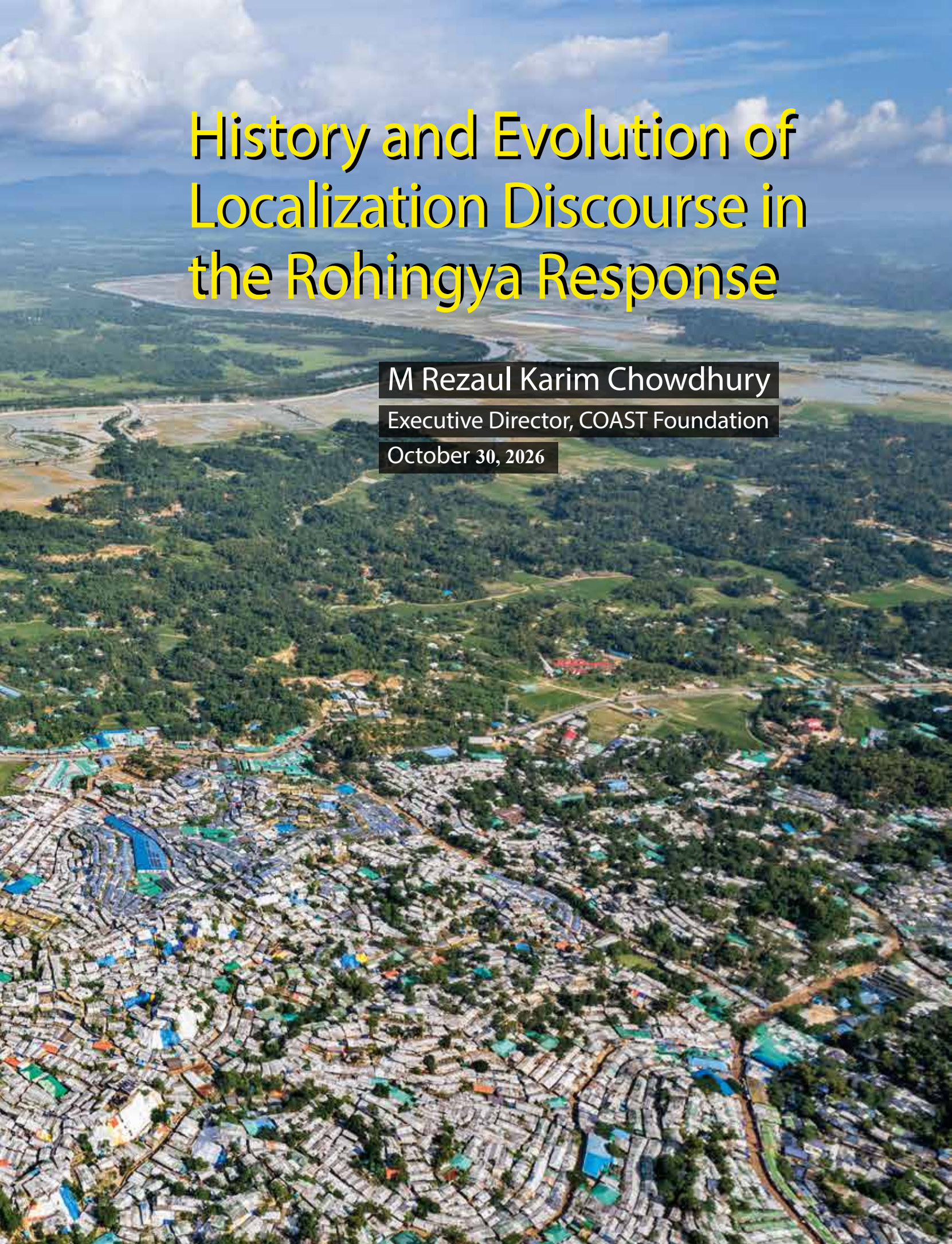


History and Evolution of Localization Discourse in the Rohingya Response

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October 30, 2026

If anybody in the line of thinking considers that the peaceful coexistence that has persisted, or the leadership role of UNHCR in the Rohingya response, is primarily because of the UN agencies, then it would be a mistake. This has happened through the continuous and consistent efforts of Cox's Bazar civil society, both in the country and abroad.

Cox's Bazar NGO leaders were very much acquainted with the **World Humanitarian Summit (2014–2016)** and, subsequently, the **Grand Bargain declaration (May 2016, Istanbul)**. They were also aware of **Charter 4 Change (January 2015)**. Some of them had participated in regional and global conferences on these issues. Localization is a home-grown demand in the Rohingya response, but it has also been advanced through persuasion and positive engagement with all actors, especially UN agencies. It should be noted that during the first 40 days of the Rohingya influx, neither UN agencies nor INGOs had responded. Local NGOs, local government, and, especially, local people provided food and shelter to the Rohingya refugees.

I can **remember my first meeting with UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Loo Cock in October 2017, with a small group of people, including an OCHA official from Bangkok, at Hotel Ocean Paradise.** Abu Morshed Chowdhury and I were representing local NGOs. Please see the report at this link:
https://cxb-cso-ngo.org/2017/10/05/coxs-bazar-local-ngos-and-csos-demand-to-chief-of-ocha-under-secretary-general-mr-mark-un-agencies-must-abandon-direct-operation-single-handle-and-monopolistic-approach-too/
Since the beginning of the Rohingya influx in August 2017, UN agencies have tried to involve local NGOs (local meaning those whose leaders are from Cox's Bazar). They started inviting local NGO leaders to their meetings. Simultaneously, in Dhaka, the UNRC (United Nations Resident Coordinator) initiated a committee called the **Strategic Executive Group (SEG)**. At the request of UN officials in Cox's Bazar, an NGO leader was invited to represent Cox's Bazar NGOs in the SEG.

The UNRC, and especially donors, were very interested in localization (i.e., local NGOs having decision-making power in response management). At her request, we had a meeting with officials of the Canadian Embassy. Later, we met separately with all the donors who were working in Dhaka. Along with me, Abu Morshed Chowdhury of PHALS, Abul Kashem of HELP, Sheuly Sharma of Jago Nari, and Rashed of Nongar, we met with them during the latter part of 2017 and provided an outline of how donors and the UN should advance the process of localization.

But we have never stopped our open public campaign on the Grand Bargain, Charter 4 Change, and localization. We formed a network called the **Cox's Bazar CSO-NGO Forum (CCNF);** I, Abu Morshed Chowdhury from PHALS, and Bimol Dey from MUKTI were the co-chairs. We organized a series of public consultations in Cox's Bazar and Dhaka on these issues, especially to promote peaceful coexistence, social cohesion, and localization. Senior officials from the UN and the government participated in these public gatherings. Please see the reports at https://cxb-cso-ngo.org/. Please also see a seminar link from March 2018 in this regard:
https://cxb-cso-ngo.org/2018/03/03/urging-un-agencies-and-ingos-to-fulfill-international-commitments-in-rohingya-relief-reduce-transaction-cost-ensure-accountability-and-partnering-with-local-organization/

The first critical step was to press the government to give the leading responsibility for the response to UNHCR, not to consider Rohingya as so-called "**Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN)**, we had to organize a press conference and media campaign both in Cox's Bazar and Dhaka, Section D & E in our position paper in this link: https://www.cxb-cso-ngo.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/English-position-paper-for-the-press-conference_Dhaka_09-November-2.pdf

We organized several events like these in Cox's Bazar, Dhaka, Bangkok, and New York, especially to promote social cohesion, strengthen UNHCR's role and increase locals' involvement in the Rohingya response. Since 2107, each year CCNF and COAST have organized public events and rallies during 20th June World Refugee Day. Please see a link in this regard:
https://cxb-cso-ngo.org/2021/08/16/world-refugee-day-together-we-heal-learn-and-shine/

On 16 May 2019, in the SEG meeting, a Localization Task Force was formed with the membership of UNHCR, Oxfam, Save the Children, UNDP, COAST and PHALS. UNDP was given the secretariat responsibility. Please see the ToR of the task force at the link: https://www.cxb-cso-ngo.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/5.-ToRs-for-Localization-in-CXB-Task-Force-as-endorsed-16-May-2019.pdf

The Task Force has assigned the Center of Governance, Peace and Justice, led by Barrister Monjur Hasan, **to prepare a scoping study (June 2020).** Based on the scoping study, the SEG Co-Chairs, including the UNRC, the Chief of IoM, and UNHCR, issued a formal note. Please see the note at this link: https://www.cxb-cso-ngo.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/3.-SEG-Co-Chairs-Localization-Note-June-2021.pdf

Based on this, a localization roadmap (which included actionable and measurable indicators) has been prepared through intensive discussion at all levels.

Please see the summary report of the **localization roadmap** (September 2020) at this link: https://www.cxb-cso-ngo.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/2.-Localisation-Roadmap_Summary-compressed.pdf

And please see the approval note on this roadmap from SEG Co Chairs in this link: https://www.cxb-cso-ngo.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/1.-Subtract-from-8th-July-on-Localizastion.pdf

Meanwhile, a **Grand Bargain mission came from Geneva in September 2018**. They gave a report, please find the report link: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain/mission-report-bangladesh-localization-workstream-demonstrator-country-field-mission. Here I am giving a summary of the report below-

Grand Bargain localization workstream demonstrator country field mission to Bangladesh

Eight years ago, in September 2018, a multi-agency mission visited Bangladesh to assess how the Grand Bargain's localisation commitments were being translated into practice, particularly in the Rohingya response and disaster-prone regions. The mission brought together donors, UN agencies, INGOs, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, government representatives, and local and national organizations to identify good practices, barriers, and practical recommendations for strengthening locally led humanitarian action.

The mission recognized the dedication and capacity of local and national actors, but also identified a persistent gap between global commitments and field-level implementation. While localization was widely supported in principle, international actors often viewed it mainly through the lens of project implementation, with less emphasis on local leadership, decision-making, and equitable partnerships. The report called for two-way capacity strengthening, greater direct funding for local organizations, stronger participation of women-led organizations, and more inclusive coordination mechanisms. It also emphasized that humanitarian responses should progressively transition toward local leadership whenever feasible.

The report remains highly relevant today. As humanitarian funding declines and needs continue to grow, the recommendations made in 2018 offer practical guidance for making humanitarian action more sustainable, accountable, and locally led. They remind us that localization is not simply about shifting implementation responsibilities– it is about sharing leadership, decision-making, and resources with those closest to affected communities.

To support a shift to increased implementation of humanitarian aid by local and national actors- a shift that is aimed at equitable partnership, good practices on funding, and coordination approaches that increase leadership by local and national actors, including women, host communities and affected people. The Mission Team proposes the following key recommendations (1) for institutional donors and bilateral agencies, (2) for the UN agencies and INGOs, (3) for local and national actors, and (4) for the government of Bangladesh, to identify opportunities to strengthen local and national leadership and decision-making in humanitarian action.

We encourage colleagues working in humanitarian action, localization, and the Rohingya response to revisit this important report. Its lessons continue to inform the ongoing conversation on how we can better serve people in need through genuine partnerships and local leadership. For details, please read the full report.

Localisation Roadmap for humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar

In 2020, the Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ) at BRAC University, with support from the Localization Task Force, developed the **"Localisation Roadmap for Humanitarian Response in Cox's Bazar"**. Building on the findings of the 2018 Grand Bargain Field Mission, the Roadmap examined how humanitarian leadership, coordination, funding, and partnerships could be transformed to place local and national actors at the center of the Rohingya response.

The Roadmap also acknowledged that local organizations possess deep contextual knowledge, long-term commitment, and strong community trust, yet continue to face barriers to leadership, decision-making, and direct access to funding. Echoing the 2018 Mission Report, it emphasized that localization is not merely about increasing the number of implementation partners—it is about shifting power, strengthening equitable partnerships, investing in two-way capacity sharing, and enabling local actors to lead humanitarian action. The report also outlined practical recommendations (1) for institutional donors, (2) UN agencies and INGOs, (3) local and national organizations, and (4) the Government of Bangladesh to advance meaningful localization in Cox's Bazar.

Today, as humanitarian funding continues to decline and the Rohingya response enters another challenging phase, the Roadmap remains highly relevant. Its recommendations provide a practical pathway toward a more sustainable, accountable, and cost-effective humanitarian system—one that values local leadership, shared decision-making, and genuine partnerships rather than treating localization as a policy aspiration alone.



Ukhiya, Teknaf, Cox's Bazar, September 1, 2024
Photo: Din Mohammad Shibly/COAST Founda-

We encourage colleagues working in humanitarian action, localization, and the Rohingya response to revisit this important report. Many of the challenges identified in 2020 remain relevant today, making its recommendations as timely as ever. For details, please read the full report of localization roadmap.

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