

Community engagement in protracted crises: Lessons from locally-driven research approaches in Bangladesh

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Recognizing that members of conflict-affected populations contribute unique capabilities and insights for conducting research about the impacts of conflict, X-Border Local Research Network projects are specifically rooted in community-driven approaches. This generates an understanding of critical issues that is grounded in the perspectives of those who experience them first-hand. Since 2019, the Centre for Peace and Justice, Brac University (CPJ) and The Asia Foundation, both network partners, collaborated on a series of these initiatives. This paper summarizes the methodologies developed and the lessons that have surfaced over the course of these activities.

Overview

Since 2019, The Asia Foundation and CPJ have collaborated as partners in the X-Border Local Research Network, an initiative funded by UK Aid to develop a better global understanding of political, economic and social dynamics in conflict-affected borderlands. Research commissioned under the Network supports more effective policymaking and programming in borderland regions that experience conflict. The Network is a component of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) X-Border Conflict: Evidence, Policy and Trends (XCEPT) initiative, and emphasizes partnership with researchers and research institutions based in regions that they study.

The Asia Foundation and CPJ work in close coordination with each other and collaborate with Rohingya refugee community research volunteers from Myanmar living in camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Although displaced Rohingya are not permitted to hold formal employment in Bangladesh, volunteers who contribute to the X-Border research receive a stipend in exchange for volunteer work on projects that support the humanitarian response.

The role of these volunteers is critical for conducting effective research, and they collect the vast majority of quantitative and qualitative data. CPJ has worked with dozens of Rohingya youth on various programs in the past, and recruited the volunteers from its existing networks. Engaging the volunteers undoubtedly enabled the team to collect much more data than would have been possible had the volunteers not been members of camp communities. The data produced richer and more granular insight than would have been possible otherwise; respondents gained trust as they spoke numerous times with the same volunteer, typically someone with whom they were already acquainted.

Together, The Asia Foundation, CPJ, and the volunteers have developed a set of approaches for carrying out research on topics that are difficult to study, or that tend to be overlooked. The lessons learned by the teams about effective collaboration for local research are summarized below. These include skills building for national and local researchers, conscientious approaches to engaging with survey and interview respondents, and an emphasis on building trust and long-term collaboration with target groups in order to gather honest and critical feedback.

Community-based activities and interventions throughout the research process:

- *Research design:* Community members are engaged from the early stages of research as community research volunteers (henceforth referred to as “volunteers”). They are involved in the process of designing and testing research
- *Implementation:* Researchers are able to communicate openly with respondents from within their own communities, and help respondents feel comfortable sharing their views. Mentorship and “refreshers” are conducted throughout the data collection phase for

tools, and consulted to provide inputs during the review and refinement process.

- *Networking and outreach:* Community leaders are also engaged to ensure their supportiveness of projects. When applying convenience sampling methods, volunteers also source respondents from within their own “Trust Networks,” identified through a mapping process to ensure demographic diversity of the respondent group.
- *Training:* Volunteers working on each initiative receive training on the theoretical underpinnings of the research, research ethics, specific tools and technical skills, and “soft skills” needed for building trust with respondents.

further skills development and troubleshooting.

- *Consolidation:* Volunteers conduct the first level of summarizing and analyzing data, providing their own insights on key findings, demographic variability, and nuanced interpretations. This occurs in written form through weekly questionnaires and through “Chat Hours,” a weekly online chat session for volunteers to reflect on and share key findings to staff and guests from the humanitarian sector.
- *Dissemination:* Volunteers review draft reports, gather community feedback by providing verbal summaries in their own language, and are engaged in the process of revising and finalizing written materials. They have also helped disseminate audio summaries of reports and documented community reactions and additional feedback.

Foundations of the methodology

The X-Border research activities strive to engage closely with community members to produce policy research with recommendations for consideration by decision-makers. This means incorporating more traditional qualitative and quantitative research methods as well as those drawing from Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is a democratizing approach that seeks to transform the way knowledge is produced by placing the participation of the targeted population at the heart of the research process.

By combining participation, action, and research, PAR avoids the extractive tendency of research, and seeks positive social outcomes for those affected by the research. PAR recognizes that practitioners simultaneously *participate* as subjects within their own communities, that they take *action* within those communities, and contribute to the production of knowledge about and for their communities through *research*.

While embracing PAR concepts, the X-Border initiative also aims explicitly to influence policy-making. Those responsible for crafting foreign aid policy often reside far from the places impacted by their decisions, and rely on data to acquire a view of issues and trends.

Thus, in order to ensure that community perspectives trickle up to impact global policy interventions, X-Border researchers are tasked with finding ways to expose experiences of people living in conflict-affected borderlands in ways that policymakers can act upon: for example, the “[Transnational Everyday](#)” flow of goods, people and ideas across borders. This topic and the nuanced qualitative and quantitative methods needed to understand it were explored by X-Border researchers who came together from different parts of the world during a 2019 workshop.

Research in a challenging setting

The Rohingya camps in Bangladesh are a difficult environment, where refugees struggle to make ends meet, lack access to education and livelihoods, and face an uncertain future. Many say they have interacted with researchers and enumerators, but rarely have access to research findings or observe tangible changes after providing inputs. The sensitivity of conducting community-based research in such an environment requires researchers to possess more than just technical capacity. Trauma- and conflict-sensitive approaches are essential to preventing further harm.

As many camp residents lack information about the purpose of research, volunteers are equipped to provide detailed explanations about the purpose and goals of the research. This is needed to ensure that potential respondents can consent to participate in a well informed and meaningful way. Also important are “soft skills,” such as communicativeness, politeness and empathy needed to establish rapport and build trust with potential respondents.

The need for precaution and diligence means that Rohingya are often best-placed to collect data within their own communities. For this reason, all X-Border research activities undertaken in the Rohingya camps thus far have been enumerated solely by camp residents themselves, who share a common culture, language, and lived experience of conflict as the respondents they engage with.

The team developed different methods and tools for each study in response to unique challenges arising from the topics and the evolving operational landscape. Each method has yielded substantial sets of quantitative and qualitative data.

Achievements to date

Mitigating Hardship with Mobility: The Coping Strategies of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

Themes

- Decision-making and risk-taking by families in relation to transnational mobility.
- Implications of mobility for personal security and wellbeing
- Effects of interventions by state and development actors on displaced people’s access to relatives abroad, remittances, and cross-border movement

Methods

- [Representative survey](#) of 1,611 households
- 50 in-depth, key informant interviews with camp residents
- Focus groups for sharing back findings by audio and gathering reactions

Research outputs

- Full report: [Navigating at the Margins: Family, Mobility, and Livelihoods Amongst Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh](#)
- Policy Brief - [Beyond Relief: Securing Livelihoods and Agency for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh](#)
- Briefing paper - [Emerging Marketplace Dynamics in Rohingya Camps](#)

Bridging Humanitarian and Community Responses to Covid-19 in Rohingya Camps

Themes

- Community perspectives on the impact of Covid-19 on Rohingya camps
- Perceptions around formal, informal and social justice issues

Methods

- Phone-based community feedback consultations
- Virtual chat sessions conducted on WhatsApp
- Online group analysis sessions conducted over video calls
- Convenience and randomized sampling strategies

Research outputs

- Policy brief #1 on experiences with [access to civil justice in the camps](#)
- Policy brief #2 on perceptions around [marriage and social justice](#) in the camps
- Policy brief #3 on camp residents’ perceptions around the [community engagement approaches](#) undertaken by humanitarians

Forging responsive community research during Covid-19 in Rohingya Camps

For the recent *Bridging Humanitarian and Community Responses to Covid-19 in Rohingya Camps* project, which ran from May 2020 to March 2021, a team of 40 volunteers collected community feedback, questions and comments on a different topic each month, particularly on issues related to the pandemic and its reverberating impacts on camp life. The project began during a moment when movement restrictions and the need to practice social distancing created obstacles to the feedback collection process, compounding existing challenges and sensitivities. It aimed to establish a two-directional bridge between community and humanitarian responses to the pandemic: research outputs helped build humanitarian decision-makers' awareness of community perspectives and responses to Covid-19, while community members gained awareness of humanitarian responses.

Although the arrival of Covid-19 in the camps created new informational needs to understand its spread and impacts, the situation also meant that research staff lost the ability to travel and study the situation in person. But because the team had already spent two years building a close working relationship with community research volunteers, it was possible to find ways to engage with them and other camp residents remotely, both online and by phone.

This was an important lifeline. From 2017 – when over 700,000 Rohingya fled Myanmar - until the pandemic hit, Bangladeshi and international researchers, as well as diplomatic delegations, were able to visit the camps to consult people's views. The humanitarian footprint decreased significantly at the onset of the pandemic, and as international travel ground to a halt, refugees felt increasingly cut off from the world.

A year-long internet network shutdown was reversed shortly after the project began, which meant that remote communication became possible. This prompted the team to develop a remotely-managed, largely phone-based feedback collection process and system for sharing inputs to humanitarian decision-makers. Community feedback was analyzed and used as the basis of the policy briefs and other rapid analysis papers utilized by humanitarian decision-makers in the Rohingya response.

In this piece...

The following sections explore five different lessons the research team has distilled over the course of project activities:

1. Volunteers benefit when enumeration training is conducted as an immersive **learning experience**.
2. Long-term, personal engagement between staff and community researchers **earns community trust** and builds familiarity with the research process.
3. **Two-way exchange** between volunteers and respondents enhances the research experience for respondents and uncovers areas for further inquiry.
4. **Community-driven analysis** helps ensure that local perspectives and priorities are reflected in research outputs and outcomes.
5. Activities can be designed to reflect and foster the **multi-faceted purposes** of research.
6. Utilization of **remote communication tools** including phone, messaging apps, and teleconferencing platforms to reduce potential risk of Covid-19 infection, and to ensure ongoing communication between CPJ's camp-based, national, and international researchers.

Building multi-faceted research skills through training and experience

Takeaway #1: Volunteers benefit when enumeration training is conducted as an immersive learning opportunity.

The research preparation stage provides an opportunity for enumerators to acquire knowledge build skills:

- Social studies and thematic topics key to understanding the purpose of the studies they enumerate.
- The scientific method and other underpinnings of Western research epistemologies. These are not usually discussed in enumeration training that focuses solely on imparting the minimum required technical information.
- Organizational and communication skills transferable for future employment and for spearheading their own future research initiatives.

Formal education is prohibited for camp youth, so training that prepares them to serve as volunteers on research projects presents a rare opportunity to build skills and gain new knowledge about the topics of inquiry. The research team approaches projects as opportunities for volunteers to learn and practice new skills. Many Rohingya research volunteers who have worked with us are university-aged youth, who – had they been able to access desired educational opportunities in a more permissive context – would likely be enrolled in degree programs.

As an academic institution within a university, CPJ is well-positioned to provide such training. The eagerness of the volunteers to supplement their lack of formal education access through non-formal learning and training places an onus on staff, who serve as instructors and mentors throughout projects in ways that go beyond their official supervisory role.

Though CPJ is unable to provide accredited learning, the community research volunteers receive training and project completion certificates, and they are encouraged to add their participation in the research training to their resumes in anticipation of future career pursuits. The capacity building process consists of an initial training to introduce the scientific method, impart research skills, discuss ethics, and teach methodologies and information specific to the research project, as well as follow-up mentorship, and ongoing “refresher” training to refine skills.

The Asia Foundation’s partnership with CPJ complements the organization’s approach to regional development - bringing together local individuals, communities, and governments. The X-Border project helps strengthen these linkages. For example, a young Rohingya man who worked as a volunteer on the study joined a virtual report launch event from the camps and shared his perspectives on the research findings to a group of policymakers.

The team relied primarily on three innovations to conduct research and produce outputs: first, the formation of community-based “Trust Networks;” second, weekly online “Chat Hours” for multi-stakeholder communication; and third, a monthly “Community Q&A” activity.

Trust-building is foundational

Takeaway #2: Long-term, personal engagement between staff and community researchers earns community trust and builds familiarity with the research process.

Repeated engagement between researchers and respondents also builds institutional reputability and acceptance as respondents develop awareness of the purpose, limitations and potential impacts of research. With this trust established, more frank and nuanced feedback can be collected during community feedback processes, allowing greater insight into the topics of inquiry.

The Trust Network approach evolved as a way to conduct research despite Covid-related movement restrictions. Due to the need for social distancing, typical randomized sampling methods (in which enumerators conduct door-to-door visits to potential respondents) were not feasible. Also, the researchers sought to elicit frank and nuanced feedback, which can be difficult to collect via random, one-off house visits even under normal conditions. This is due to respondents' hesitation to share critical views with enumerators they do not know, even if those enumerators are fellow camp residents.

As a result, a “convenience sampling” approach was developed in which each of the 40 community research volunteers undertook a mapping exercise, listing all persons within their own networks whom they could consult regularly for feedback. They were asked to consider neighbors, friends, religious community members, fellow villagers, and key community stakeholders such as teachers, elders, *majhi* (block captains) and religious leaders. The resulting Trust Networks included over 3,000 individuals who were briefed on the approach and who agreed to participate in regular consultation on a rotating basis, with roughly 1,000 consulted each month.

Toward gender-balanced Trust Networks

Many research activities in the Rohingya camps engage women and adolescent girls through door-to-door visits and interview arrangements that require them to leave their shelters, sometimes seen as a violation of cultural importance placed on women's modesty, especially when activities are conducted by male researchers. Under the Trust Network approach, mainly female volunteers targeted women and adolescent girls, many of whom said that the phone-based approach provided their first opportunity to provide feedback.

The inclusion of female volunteers was thus also a priority, as their participation in the research made it easier to engage female respondents. This approach led to the inclusion of 1,380 female respondents amongst 1,500 in total, pointing to the usefulness of virtual and phone-based techniques to engage more women and other marginalized groups in the future, such as elders, people with disabilities, and people from socioeconomic groups that tend to be excluded from consultative processes.

Inviting inputs: The importance of open-ended feedback

Takeaway #3: Two-way exchange between researchers and respondents enhances the learning process and uncovers areas for further inquiry.

Research is often a one-directional process in which researchers have little accountability to respondents. To avoid this construct, The Asia Foundation and CPJ invite respondents to submit comments and questions on any topic of their concern, and consistently seek to provide answers where it is possible to do so. Through this approach, research becomes a two-way learning process. By engaging with a researcher to share views as well as ask questions, respondents have the opportunity to gain knowledge about topics on which they might normally lack access to information.

As another facet of earning trust amongst respondents during the immediate data collection process and amongst the broader community, all respondents approached for X-Border Local Research Network quantitative and qualitative research activities have been invited to share comments, questions, and feedback about any topic of concern. People tend to ask questions and make comments about the overall Rohingya crisis, their prospects of being able to go home soon, their humanitarian needs, and the international justice processes underway to investigate alleged crimes committed against the Rohingya by the Myanmar military.

This has helped identify areas where camp residents lack access to information as well as potential topics for follow-up research. Many respondents also express concerns about their children's education, the lack of security and livelihoods in the camps, and about their mental health challenges.

Here, it has been important for the volunteers to strike a balance when listening and writing down people's feedback: on one hand, many respondents express gratitude for being able to have their views compiled, and said that they experienced the opportunity to share and be heard as cathartic. At the same time, many express doubt over whether their concerns would be addressed and resolved.

The volunteers explain the potential impacts and limitations of this feedback collection process, and are clear about the research team's inability to directly influence humanitarian decision-making or the justice process. Instead, they strive to ensure that community views are amplified, often to CPJ staff who then communicate concerns to relevant stakeholders. By taking a moment to discuss these limitations while raising concerns to the extent possible, the team strives to avoid the risk of unfairly raising peoples' expectations whilst providing a space for them to share and feel heard.

Information access has always been a challenge in the camps, where the majority of households lack internet connectivity and devices, have little or no access to electricity, and have no member who is functionally literate. Things became more difficult during the pandemic, which arrived at the end of a year-long internet shutdown. Mobile data networks are now available from many parts of the camp, but accessible only to those who possess a device and can afford to purchase data packages. Wi-Fi remains unavailable. Volunteers began finding that Trust Network members looked to them for answers to various questions about current events and the Rohingya situation overall.

In order to accommodate their need for information, the volunteers started compiling these questions, and received hundreds of inquiries per month about countless topics, but with many recurring themes. These included questions about the pandemic, global affairs, the Rohingya crisis, current events in Myanmar, and humanitarian services in the camps. As a way to respond to each question, staff compiled a monthly Q&A document that volunteers used the following month to provide answers to those who asked them. Though not required as a project deliverable, this aspect of the project earned participants' appreciation and helped them understand CPJ's role as a knowledge partner rather than as a provider of aid.

Supporting community understanding and responsiveness to Covid-19

Volunteers submitted many questions from Trust Network members seeking information about Covid-19 and clarification on rumors circulating about the virus, whether a vaccine or cure existed, and whether Rohingya would be able to get vaccinated. (Overall, the great majority of people said they wanted vaccine access.) Early in the pandemic, rumors and concerns arose throughout the community about the treatment of patients in isolation centers. In response, CPJ arranged for a group of volunteers to visit one of these centers. They later reported details of their visit with their Trust Network members to help assuage concerns. On several occasions, CPJ arranged for the volunteers to communicate with WHO and health NGO officials, who answered frequently asked medical questions about the virus.

Throughout the project volunteers also supported Health and Education for All (HAEFA), an NGO that operates health clinics in the camps. HAEFA aimed to "harness the power of the trained volunteers to improve trust and ameliorate care" for camp residents presenting Covid-19 symptoms and referred by HAEFA for home quarantine. Four CPJ volunteers monitored the patients for 14 days by phoning them regularly, a responsibility added to their regular research activities. This helped HAEFA track patients and determine when further interventions were needed. According to HAEFA, "The impressive work of the trained Rohingya volunteers and HAEFA clinicians has saved countless lives since summer 2020."

Chat Hours for virtual communication

Takeaway #4: Community-driven analysis helps ensure that local perspectives and priorities are reflected in research outputs and outcomes.

Training and opportunities to contribute to data analysis equips community researchers to play an important role in distilling findings and weaving narratives. Also, by reflecting on nuances arising in the data collection process which may remain invisible to outsiders, such as questions that respondents felt cautious about answering transparently and reasons for variability of responses across demographic groups, lessons can be learned about the ways in which the research process influences thematic findings.

During the *Bridging Community and Humanitarian Responses to Covid-19* project, the volunteers spent the first two weeks of each month conducting interviews, then spent an additional week working on their own individual analysis of findings before using the last week of the month to work in “pods” to synthesize a cohesive group analysis based on all team members’ findings. Due to their own lived experience and familiarity with context, the volunteers were in the best position to initiate the analytical process following data collection. Staff sought to maximize these contributions by developing a set of data analysis worksheets and by conducting training to offer guidelines and a systematic framework.

Having navigated the challenge of gathering community feedback during lockdown, staff had to find a way to communicate with the volunteers about their findings and analysis. This required navigating two challenges. First, each pod of volunteers submitted written findings in English every week, but not all volunteers spoke English and staff needed a way to hear from them. Bangladeshi research staff who speak Rohingya fluently were the backbone for day-to-day communications, enabling non-English speakers to participate.

In addition, a large volume of data was incoming. A platform was needed for verbal communication with live translation to ensure a concise yet comprehensive discussion of findings. A virtual platform for engagement would also be a way for guests from the humanitarian community to meet with the volunteers, as in-person meetings between humanitarians and camp residents had become scarce during the pandemic. The volunteers identified WhatsApp as a platform used widely by camp residents and humanitarians alike, and a dedicated group was created for interaction between them and staff. Every Thursday morning, the group met for a one-hour chat by messaging on WhatsApp. The session was later migrated to Google Meet when it was determined that most volunteers could access it from their shelters.

Staff opened each “Chat Hour” by quickly polling the volunteers to ask about the Covid-19 situation in their respective camps and about their families’ health. During one period when the virus was spreading through the camps, this process helped flag potential hotspots, and staff notified Cox’s Bazar-based World Health Organization officials for further investigation. Staff also polled volunteers on the emerging concerns they perceived to be arising within their Trust Networks.

After the polling, the volunteers briefed staff on the situation in their respective camps and discussed their weekly research findings, either by text or audio, in English or Rohingya. A CPJ staff researcher provided live translation for international staff members. After this process of summarizing key findings, the conversation was turned over to a humanitarian guest on most occasions. These guests were temporarily added to the WhatsApp group for the duration of the Chat Hour and briefed beforehand on the format. Guests asked questions or provided information to the volunteers, who raised their questions and concerns in turn.

A full transcript of every Chat Hour was produced and edited down to a consolidated one-page briefing note that was circulated to a distribution list of over 100 humanitarian decision-makers each weekend. This group included diplomats in Dhaka, INGO representatives, government and UN officials, amongst others.

Sharing back findings: Making research findings useful for community members

Takeaway #5: Activities can be designed to reflect and foster the multi-faceted purposes of research.

The other purposes and potential impacts of research should be considered and communicated, such as the way it can instigate critical reflection and foster community dialogue on issues and solutions. In addition, comments from some respondents indicate the potential for locally-driven research to feel cathartic as it enables marginalized people's voices to be raised and establishes greater ownership over stories and narratives. Research can also be constructed so as to magnify positive aspects of refugees' lives in ways that break down stigma and anti-refugee biases.

Ultimately, the goal of research about the issues faced by refugees is to generate knowledge and understanding leading to improved policy and programmatic responses. In practice, researchers recognize that their outputs often fail to have a direct impact on policy. This can be a source of frustration amongst staff, volunteers and respondents alike.

But research has the potential for other impacts beyond policy. Some of these impacts arise during the process stage of participatory research by allowing people to raise their voices and concerns. In addition, the data collection stage may offer a chance for respondents to gain awareness about a topic, such as through focus group discussions where researchers share information and then document people's reactions to that information. Other outcomes come about in the dissemination stage, when sharing back findings enables communities to accumulate a statistical view of their own population.

In addition to working with the volunteers throughout design, data collection, and analysis, staff also engaged them in the review and dissemination stages of the project. After compiling one policy brief about community views on the intersection of marriage and social justice issues, volunteers undertook a systematic review process in which the volunteers with advanced English language skills read and explained the papers' contents to the non-English speaking volunteers in their pods. A team workshop was then held to understand the volunteers' reactions to the papers and to collect their feedback, which was incorporated during the revision process.

The volunteers also shared a semi-final draft of the piece with members of their Trust Networks. Though unable to share the drafts with all 3,000 Trust Network members, this additional sharing process served several purposes. First, the team wanted community participants to know how their inputs were being used. This demonstrated accountability, and created transparency around a step of the research process that is often left obscure to the target population. Many Trust Network members expressed a mix of appreciation and frustration about this, with some noting that they had spoken to various research teams in the past, but had rarely learned of findings and outputs.

Key findings from the *Mitigating Hardship with Mobility* study were translated into a Rohingya language audio program that the volunteers played for listening groups in the camps. After playing the program, the volunteers asked the listeners a set of questions and documented their reactions to the findings.

Navigating challenges

Over the course of implementing these novel approaches, methods were adapted as lessons were learned. Before the pandemic, CPJ met with influential community members and civil society leaders in person to explain its approach and request their support. Such conversations were not possible during the pandemic, posing a challenge to the staff's ability to ensure the support of influential persons when launching new projects. Regardless of their support of previous activities, the team learned that these relationships should be reinforced periodically to avoid misperceptions.

A challenging moment occurred during a project on camp residents' perceptions and views about current events. (This was a separate initiative from those described in this paper.) Some community members unacquainted with the X-Border approach misunderstood the research as an attempt to influence rather than to document community views, and rumors spread. This experience was a reminder about the importance of not only building, but maintaining and expanding, engagement with a range of stakeholders. The pandemic also made it difficult to conduct team-building activities amongst volunteers, which normally would take place during training.

Since the arrival of the mass 2017 influx of refugees, the policy environment has shifted several times, impacting various facets of the research process. Research staff's access to the camps depends on permission from government authorities, who must have a clear understanding of the research. Even before the pandemic, access fluctuated in response to deteriorating camp security, amongst other setbacks. Also, because policy dictates that the crisis be addressed as a temporary emergency situation, only basic humanitarian service provision is permitted. This means that The Asia Foundation and CPJ's roles as knowledge partners contributing to the humanitarian response through research has at times been unclear to community members and authorities alike. Despite securing government permission for all activities, volunteers and staff have been tasked with explaining the purpose of their activities and the reasons why they are not able to provide material aid.

Linking to localization

The participatory approaches outlined above suggest the potential for humanitarian research to become locally driven in ways that mirror the trend toward localization of humanitarian action. The localization agenda, outlined under a [Grand Bargain](#) forged at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, established a set of targets for the restructuring of aid financing and the reallocation of funding, decision-making, and power away from international agencies into the hands of local and national organizations. These targets were designed to reform traditional humanitarian decision-making and action, often criticized as top-down and insufficiently informed by community-level perspectives. Localization recognizes that affected populations know their own needs and priorities, and that local responders should be empowered to address them. One way to accomplish this is through the localization of research design and implementation.

The “complementarity” principle of localization entails the involvement of both local and international stakeholders throughout programming. As refugees sheltering in Bangladesh, Rohingya cannot register NGOs or receive donor funding directly, which affects their ability to directly participate in the localization process. Community-based research constitutes an opportunity for camp residents to play a driving role in generating knowledge about the issues affecting their lives. Rather than playing a role as external “experts” or “analysts,” X-Border project staff mainly serve in a mentorship role and help open spaces for community perspectives to be amplified.

The potential for a process of localization to extend into the humanitarian research sector merits further exploration. As The Asia Foundation and CPJ's experiences show, participatory approaches are possible even in severely restricted environments, such as during a pandemic.

Continuing to learn and apply lessons

The Asia Foundation and CPJ plan to partner on future research for further examination of some of the themes that emerged during previous projects, particularly those gleaned from open-ended feedback collection activities. As a space is created for camp residents to raise their own concerns and needs, the research team is able to better understand their priorities and design responsive research that further compiles and analyzes their views.

There is more room for progress in listening to and reflecting the priorities of refugees in X-Border research activities, and the research team strives to continue placing these at the center of the approach. Other research organizations are encouraged to consider the lessons learnt and summarized here, and to contact The Asia Foundation and CPJ to share their own tips and takeaways.

Synopsis of lessons learned

- Center the role of members of the affected population at each stage of the research
- Build trust with community members and with community influencers on an ongoing basis
- Incorporate the localization principles of complementarity and participation through PAR
- Utilize online platforms for ongoing communication despite the need for social distancing during the pandemic
- Ensure that a sufficient mechanism is in place for troubleshooting despite the limitations of remote working
- Be honest, direct and clear about the purpose, goals, potential benefits and limitations of the research in order to ensure community understanding and respondents' ability to provide informed consent
- Collaborate with community research volunteers on a long-term basis to build skills incrementally