

## **CONFLICT-SENSITIVITY AS STRATEGIC & COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY**

**Koenraad Van Brabant - 27 February 2018**

In earlier GMI Insights on conflict and peace, I identified some common misunderstandings and a major blind spot, when it comes to working with conflict sensitivity in practice as well as its link with risk management, protection and accountability to affected populations.<sup>1</sup> Here I add or confirm three points, often not well understood, and illustrate them with recent observations in Bangladesh.

### **Key Messages:**

1. Working with conflict-sensitivity starts with strategic, not just operational decisions.
2. Relief workers, used to delivering goods and services, do not easily practice a different approach – and may not be encouraged to do so.
3. Working with conflict-sensitivity in any given operating environment, requires a multi-agency, not an individual agency approach.

### **1. Conflict-Sensitivity Starts with Strategic Choices.**

Five months into the response to the rapid, large scale, influx of people fleeing persecution in Rakhine state, Myanmar (overwhelmingly Rohingya Muslims and a few Hindu families) in Cox Bazaar district of Bangladesh, the unintended consequences of major strategic choices are becoming clear.

The response has been characterised by the massive scaling up of mostly UN and some INGO agencies, with much reliance on expatriate staff in a supply-driven, not a demand-led, process. These same UN

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<sup>1</sup> *Conflict-sensitivity: Some misunderstandings and a blind spot*. August 2016; *Conflict-sensitivity, accountability to affected populations, risk management & protection: how do they relate to each other?* September 2017

agencies and INGOs have largely dominated the operational coordination platform, the Inter-Sectoral Coordination Group (ISCG). Institutional donors by and large have enabled this by how they chose to channel their funds. Though there are smaller international agencies that have chosen to support Bangladeshi partners, the overall picture is more one in which Bangladeshi CSOs find themselves now in roles of subcontractors. They are confronted with the usual 'hesitations' about national organisations, that they have '*limited capacity and should not be overstretched*', are too dependent on a 'founder', constitute a greater '*risk of fraud and corruption*' etc. Yet many have been 'partners' of international organisations for decades, and several of them have received direct funding from Western donors in the past; a history or track record that seems to be largely ignored. Many also feel frustration and upset over the still too frequent attitudes of 'superiority' among internationals.

In the recruitment bonanza that accompanied the 'surge', many of them lost some or more of their best staff to international agencies offering much higher salaries. For many months, they have been largely absent from the 'coordination', or internationals invited some hand-picked national CSOs without due process to ensure the legitimacy of their 'representation'. Some point out that only the Government has formal authority to approve or deny interventions, so that donors or international should not 'oblige' them to get 'authorisation' for their proposed actions.

A second consequence is the 'distance' from Government. Very few government officials participate in the ISCG coordination and standards-setting meetings. Surely, challenges on the Government side also play a role. The interaction between the different governmental entities involved is not as quick and smooth as the situation requires, and policies or their application e.g. regarding work-visa for international staff, are not always adapted and consistent. Unlike in other crisis situations, there seems to have been less effort to provide the also overstretched government entities with material support and relevant expertise, at national, district and even more so sub-district level, and to develop strong working relationships. The situation is not one of 'conflict', but there is a clear 'disconnect' that is creating some tension and makes 'joint' planning difficult. Bangladeshi CSOs are used to work closely with the Government. Their virtual absence from the 'world of internationals' may be a missed opportunity to build more effective working relationships with Government.

Thirdly, five months into the response, the negative impacts of the influx, and the growing ‘mixed feelings’ among the Bangladeshi ‘host community’, have become a top priority for the Government and for those Bangladeshi CSOs that have been working in this local environment for years. Strategically, this will mean that programmes and projects will have to be designed to also benefit those sections of the host community that have been most negatively affected – a classical ‘conflict sensitivity’ scenario, that is only beginning to get some attention. As one Bangladeshi CSO director put it: *“If we maintain harmony between the refugees and the host community, then we can better afford to wait for the conditions for correct repatriation to emerge in Myanmar.”*

Overall then, we see areas of tension arising because of early strategic ‘choices’ that created a response heavily centred on international agencies and their expatriate staff, most of whom are newcomers to Bangladesh - and turning over very rapidly. There has been more ‘replacing’ than ‘reinforcing’ of national and local actors. If not handled well, this could lead to more difficult relationships, that are not in the interest of any of the affected populations and will reduce the ‘value-for-money’ for those who donated. Surprising is that these issues have not been better anticipated and proactively addressed, as they have presented themselves so often in other major crises.

## **2. The Challenge of Working Differently.**

The almost 700.000 people who arrived in Bangladesh over the span of a good three months in late 2017, were in a bad condition. Focusing on life-saving assistance, and the provision of basic services like shelter, water, sanitation and health, was the appropriate priority.

But listening to staff from international and Bangladeshi agencies five months later, it is striking how superficial the understanding of the Rohingya still is. They are talked about as if they are a fairly homogenous ‘community’ which, among 700.000 people, is rarely the case. ‘Majhis’, or leaders of a ‘block’ of a certain number of refugee families, came into being during the influx, when the Bangladesh Army and other aid agencies needed help with the urgent distributions. Several aid workers are now talking about them as ‘community representatives’, which they are not, and using them as ‘key informants’ in their attempts to get ‘community engagement’. Yet they are all male, among a refugee population with a high proportion of women and children.

Not helpful either is the circulation of negative stereotypes about the Rohingya, among international and Bangladeshi aid workers alike. Much is made of their high rate of illiteracy, their being traumatised, their very conservative Islam, and the restrictions that are imposed on women. One can also hear more derogatory comments, about their lack of hygiene and of discipline, and their large families. Negative stereotypes do not encourage the curiosity that is needed to 'understand' this population better.

The few who are more knowledgeable about the Rohingya community, typically from engagement with them in Myanmar, point out that there are quite a few Rohingya who could access some education there, and often understand English and can read and write in the Burmese script; that there are many with a more moderate interpretation of their religious precepts, that there are informal woman leaders and a definitely willingness among several Rohingya women to engage more actively, if they are provided the safe space to develop that confidence and explore the opportunity, and that respected individuals and opinion-makers have been side-lined by the aid providers.

Some agencies use their projects to have more qualitative engagement with e.g. children, women and male adolescents. But the big players seem more focused on technological solutions to communicate with the Rohingya population and get their feedback and input. Technology is favoured because it makes it easier to process feedback and complaints as 'data' and to press a button to establish 'trends'. Those familiar with the Rohingya however emphasise the vital precondition of 'trust', in a population that over the past 35 years has been systematically discriminated and at times violently persecuted in Myanmar. A trust that can only be very personalised: serious and sensitive issues are very unlikely to be shared with 'someone' at the other end of a phone line or an 'app', who is not known. All the more so, as the fear of 'forced repatriation' increases. Statistics, with their pretense of 'hard evidence', risk fuelling mistaken 'insights' and conclusions.

Over the years, we have conducted training on working with accountability and conflict sensitivity to aid workers whose experience was mostly of 'delivering' goods and services. We have learned that it can be a big leap from looking at social groups through the lens of '*needs*' and '*vulnerability*', to applying a lens of '*power*', '*inclusion/exclusion*', '*stereotyping*', '*distrust*', '*tension*' and '*conflict*'. Much of this is

not so easily visible (key power brokers can be residing far away), and people may be reluctant to talk about it when they don't know if they can trust the aid worker/agency. In addition, aid workers can be reluctant to address abuse of power (e.g. via manipulation of information) including for personal profit, from influential local figures, for fear of reprisals.

Working with conflict sensitivity and accountability to affected populations requires a willingness and ability to step back from delivering goods and services, and learn about the less visible social, political and economic dynamics within and between social 'groups'. It is a different interest and skill, requires different behaviours and may lead to different decisions and designs of interventions. For the time being, this is still in short supply in Cox Bazaar district. There is also little incentive to do so, if the whole programmatic logic, also encouraged by donors, remains concentrated on 'delivery at scale'. Worse, there may be a *'pressure to spend'*, which leads senior managers to worry more about the *'burn rate'* of the money, than about negative impacts or accountability to the affected populations.

### **3. A Collective, not an Individual Agency Responsibility.**

For now, the assistance providers are not yet well positioned to work with conflict sensitivity and accountability towards the new wave of forcibly displaced Rohingya. In addition, few seem to pay attention to, or have any insight in, the dynamics between the Rohingya who took refuge in Bangladesh in previous years, and the newcomers who attract so much aid and attention.

Similar concerns apply when more programming is oriented towards the 'host population'. Socio-economic and environmental impact assessments and market surveys confirm the perception of 'burden' and negative impacts. There is awareness that certain sections of the 'host community', such as those whose land is now occupied by refugees or who compete on the daily labour market, have lost heavily, though others are benefitting through jobs and business opportunities. There has already been some mobilisation against the Rohingya and the aid agencies, fuelled by such grievances, and by the perceived higher standards of international compared to national 'social welfare'. Negative sentiments can also be stirred up by disgruntled local power-brokers who failed to have their relatives or clients hired by international agencies or get the 'bribe' they asked for. At the same time, there continue to be many local people who host Rohingya in their villages and homes.

What doesn't seem currently available, at least among the international agencies, is a deeper understanding of that varied entity called '*host community*'. Several of the more local Bangladeshi CSOs (very few women-led) who have been working in this area for years, on poverty reduction, income-generation and disaster preparedness, may have such deeper insights, and the experience of navigating local politics among formal and informal power brokers. A few may be implicated, but others will have retained their independence and principles. Tapping into that local knowledge and competency will however require seeing and treating them differently than as mere 'subcontractors'.

There is a risk that, as Government and donors direct more programming also to the host community, there will be a repeat of the same array of fragmented, competitive, supply-driven and short-term projects, that is so visible in the response to the newest arrivals. That would be a recipe for increasing existing and creating new tensions, because different sections of the host populations will see they are treated differently, and local power-brokers will play one agency off against another. There will be no shared underlying analysis and understanding and no common strategy of engagement and political navigation. Uncoordinated and unrestrained collective behaviour will then undermine the efforts of individual agencies to work with conflict-sensitivity and accountability.

'Success', seen not only as the effective delivery of basic goods and services, but also in a manner that reinforces rather than undermines 'social cohesion' within and between affected populations, will require a fundamental shift in strategic and operational behaviours among a significant number of agencies, and different incentives from the donors. That will not happen without change in the underlying 'business logic', and an infusion of competencies that are not core among most of the 'technical' experts. Can the big ship change course on time?

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