



# Bangladesh: understanding humanitarian networks

## ALNAP Case Study

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## **Glossary**

ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
ADRRN	Asia Disaster Reduction and Response Network
WHO	World Health Organization
NDMC	National Disaster Management Council
INDMCC	Inter-Ministerial Disaster Management Coordination Committee
NDMAC	National Disaster Management Advisory Committee
MDMR	Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief
DMB	Disaster Management Bureau
UNCT	United Nations Country Team
UN RC	United Nations Resident Coordinator
LCG	Local Consultative Group
LLC-DER	Local Consultative Group Working Group on Disaster and Emergency Response
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
HCTT	Humanitarian Coordination Task Team
BDCP	Bangladesh Disaster Preparedness Centre
POPI	People's Oriented Program Implementation
ECB	Emergency Capacity Building
NARRI	National Alliance for Risk Reduction and Response Initiative
ACAPS	Assessment Capacities Project
SHOUHARDO	Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development Opportunities
HAP	Humanitarian Accountability Partnership
NC4	The NGO Coordination Council for Climate Change
EquityBD	Equity and Justice Working Group
COAST Trust	Coastal Association for Social Transformation Trust

BNNRC	Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio Communication
NIRAPAD	Network for Information Response and Preparedness Activities on Disaster
ECHO	Education, Charitable and Humanitarian Organization
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
RRD	Relief, Recovery and Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
NFA	Network Functions Approach
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
SOD	Standing Orders on Disasters

## **Background and Introduction**

This case study is part of an Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) and Asia Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN) research project exploring national level humanitarian networks in Asia. The objective of this research is to improve the knowledge base on networks in the humanitarian system and, in particular, to increase our understanding of networking by national NGOs working on disaster and crisis response in Asia.

An important motivation for this work is to understand the current nature of networking at a national level, to capture instances of success, and to attempt to draw conclusions about how these successes could be replicated elsewhere. The particular research questions the project addresses are as follows:

1. In what ways are organisations currently engage in networking at a national level?
2. What form do these networks take and what functions are networks perceived as fulfilling – what functions should they be fulfilling?
3. How does the involvement of national and international organisations in national level networks and coordination mechanisms differ?
4. How do networks on disaster and crisis response relate to networks on other relevant issues, such as DRR and development agendas?
5. How are national networks linked to other networks at regional and international levels?
6. What leads to the emergence of networked forms of action?
7. What are the key challenges and opportunities for national level humanitarian networks?

In this paper, humanitarian networks are defined as *ongoing, voluntary, and dynamic relationships between autonomous organizations, with a recognizable membership and explicit purpose or goal, focused on improving humanitarian performance or reducing the impact of disasters and conflict.*

This case study begins with a description of the context for NGO and civil society organisations in Bangladesh, before outlining the specific national (government) and international structures that have arisen to manage and coordinate response to disasters in Bangladesh. The next section looks in more detail at the nature of the partnerships and collaborations between actors in the country; this is followed by a more detailed analysis of the networks operating in Bangladesh that are relevant to humanitarian and disaster management policy and programming. The case study then explores the success these networks have achieved and the

challenges they face, before presenting the emerging conclusions from the case study, which will inform the synthesis of the research.

## **The Bangladesh Context**

The People's Republic of Bangladesh lies to the north of the Bay of Bengal, occupying the fertile, low-lying Ganges-Brahmaputra delta. With a population of over 160 million people, covering an area of 150,000 km<sup>2</sup>, it is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, and the eighth most populous.

The country's borders date from Partition in 1947, which formed the newly independent State of India, at the end of British colonial rule over the Indian subcontinent. At this point, the newly ceded territory of East Bengal became part of Pakistan, albeit separated from the rest of the country by over 900 miles of Indian territory. Bangladesh's war of independence in 1971 is perhaps the most important formative event of the country's history, following years of oppression and neglect at the hands of Pakistan, and triggered in part by the failure of Pakistani government authorities to respond to a devastating cyclone. Described in 1974 by Henry Kissinger as a development 'basket case' that would be forever dependent on overseas aid, Bangladesh is now regularly lauded as a development success story (White, 2000), despite continued institutional and governance challenges (Kabeer, Mahmud, & Castro, 2012; Mahmud & Prowse, 2012).

## **Civil society and the state in Bangladesh**

Civil society actors have played a central role the development of post-independence Bangladesh. Often cited internationally as a model for the positive role that civil society can play in development, the range of actors in Bangladesh is neither homogeneous nor without divisions, but instead consists of a broad range of actors collaborating and competing for their stake in the future of the country.

The growth of a strong NGO sector in Bangladesh can be traced in large part back to the convulsions and crisis around the fight for independence from Pakistan in 1971, when many of the international NGOs now operating in the country first began programmes, and many new indigenous NGOs also emerged (Davies 1998). This growth in national actors can also be seen, in part, as an expression of national solidarity during a time of great suffering and material need (ibid). Many of the NGOs created at this time have grown and become prominent actors in society today.

Perhaps the most prominent is BRAC, the largest NGO in Bangladesh and one of the largest in the world. Founded in 1972 to provide assistance to returning refugees after the war of

independence, the organisation's work soon turned to poverty alleviation and development. Today, BRAC's work covers health, education, food security, and microfinance, as well as advocacy and campaigning. Although not focused on disaster response, it plays an important role in responding to disasters in the country. In 2011, BRAC's revenue was over \$400 million USD, half of which was generated by its own activities (including microfinance). In addition to large, prominent NGOs, typified by BRAC, many more NGOs have emerged to provide services to the poor. One estimate from 2005 suggests that the typical Bangladeshi NGO serves about 4,300 households (Gauri & Galef, 2005), and many have only limited geographic reach, concentrating instead on a small number of communities. The country now has over 2100 NGO registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau, established in 1990 to oversee NGOs operating in the country (NGOAB, 2012).

One of the most profound contributions made by the NGO sector in Bangladesh has been the growth of microfinance and community development banking. This has most famously been pioneered by organisations such as BRAC and Grameen Bank, the latter under the leadership of Muhammad Yunus. Grameen now has 8.4 million borrowers and loans of over \$1 billion USD; BRAC has 5m borrowers and loans of \$725m (The Economist, 2012). The number of organisations involved has also grown, with hundreds of development organisations now providing some form of microcredit (Yuge, 2011), many of which are also involved in disaster response and DRR activities. Debates continue on the impact of microfinance, positive and negative, and these are not explored here. However, a relevant observation from the interviews was the concern of one respondent that the prevalence of microfinance as an income generation strategy challenged the ability of agencies to be impartial when providing disaster relief, given they may be motivated to provide assistance to their customers ahead of others.

The last 40 years have seen national NGOs play a central role in the country's development, and although the state has encouraged the contribution of NGOs, this relationship has itself been turbulent, and NGOs have in many ways undermined the legitimacy of the state, as it has struggled to maintain respect for democratic principles and the rule of law (White, 2000). At the same time NGOs have not been immune from challenges affecting other state and private sector organisations, with recurrent instances of corruption, politicisation, and a failure to represent the interests of those they claim to serve (Kabeer et al., 2012).

## **Humanitarian Context**

Bangladesh, like the other cases selected as part of this research, is exposed to a range of hazards that have consistently led to large-scale humanitarian need. In order to better understand the context in which humanitarian networks operate in Bangladesh, these hazards and vulnerabilities are briefly outlined below.

### **Hazards and Vulnerability**

Bangladesh is exposed to a wide range of disaster hazards, and is consistently ranked amongst the most vulnerable countries in the world, as a result of a 'disastrous combination of extreme exposure and high vulnerability' (Alliance, 2012, 7).

The hazards to which Bangladesh is exposed stem largely from its position and geography. Located as it is in the north of the Bay of Bengal – described as a 'breeding ground' for tropical cyclones – cyclones and related hazards such as storm surge and flooding are recurrent. Other hazards such as riverbank erosion, landslips and flooding (referred to locally as water logging), are also present, while parts of the country conversely experience recurrent water shortages and drought. The country is also exposed to geophysical hazards such as earthquakes. Finally, the health consequences of the contamination of water sources by arsenic affect nearly 80 million Bangladeshis. The contamination is described by the WHO as 'the largest mass poisoning of a population in history' (WHO, 2000), an issue seen by many in Bangladesh as constituting an ongoing humanitarian emergency.

In addition to the vulnerabilities stemming from the physical geography of Bangladesh, a range of other factors contribute to the country's vulnerability. Bangladesh is among the world's most densely populated areas, with continued rapid population growth. Despite recent development gains, the country is still extremely poor. With 34 per cent of Bangladeshis living on less than 1 US\$ per day (and another 49% on less than 2 US\$), poverty is responsible for a low capacity to respond to and absorb shocks caused by natural hazards. Low literacy rates also contribute to poor public awareness around DRR issues.

This combination of wide-ranging, large-scale risk and limited coping mechanisms means that Bangladesh still suffers from serious losses on an annual basis, despite making significant gains in early warning and preparedness. Furthermore, Bangladesh is rated as the nation most vulnerable to global climate change (Harmeling, 2012), with the coastal areas predicated to be badly hit, increasing the impact of disaster events forecast for the coming years. Bangladesh is seen as an example of the gains that can be made when a government commits to investing in DRR, but also a country struggling to cope with the risks to which it is exposed.

### **National and International Response Structures**



In common with all sovereign states, the government of Bangladesh bears primary responsibility for assisting its population during emergencies, as well as developing and implementing policies to reduce risk. Given the scale of disaster vulnerability in the country, it is little surprise that elaborate institutional and policy structures have arisen at national and regional levels

### **National structures**

At the national level, three separate entities coordinate disaster response. The National Disaster Management Council (NDMC), chaired by the prime minister, has central responsibility for the oversight of response activities; the Inter-Ministerial Disaster Management Coordination Committee (IMDMCC) provides cross-ministerial coordination; and the National Disaster Management Advisory Committee (NDMAC) provides policy support and advice.

The lead Ministry in disaster management is the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MDMR), playing a central role in planning and preparedness in addition to the coordination of response. Two line agencies sit under the MDMR: the Disaster Management Bureau (DMB) and the Directorate of Relief and Rehabilitation. The DMB is a small 'professional unit' performing specialist support functions under the authority of IMDMCC. In theory, many of these national level coordination structures are replicated by similar bodies at regional and local levels, down to the lowest administrative bodies. However, in reality, the extent to which these local level structures function is mixed.

The Standing Orders on Disasters (SOD), published by the DMB, provides the key reference point for all actors in the preparation, response and recovery phases of disaster response. The SOD outlines the duties and responsibilities regarding disaster management at all levels of the state, and forms the reference point for a wide range of actors seeking to clarify the basis for their interactions with state authorities.

In addition to the structures outlined above, the emergence of the Comprehensive Disaster Management Programme (CDMP) since 2003 is an important indication of the ambitions of the Bangladeshi government in shifting its approach to one centred on addressing both the risks and consequences of disasters, including prevention, emergency response and post-disaster recovery. The CDMP has also placed a high priority on *non-structural mitigation measures*, such as community disaster preparedness, training, advocacy and public awareness (Haque & Uddin, 2013). Now entering its second phase, the pilot of the programme prioritised activities such as Disaster Management Information Centres, using communication technologies, such as SMS and radio, to gather and distribute disaster information; Community Risk Assessments using participatory methods to identify, analyse and evaluate hazards, risks and vulnerabilities; and

capacity-building initiatives, providing over 25,000 officials with disaster management training (Luxbacher, 2011).

The ambitious nature of the CDMP, and the desire to work with multiple actors including communities, necessitated a transition from a single-agency-based approach to response to a holistic strategy involving the entire development planning process of the government. Phase II seeks to go further and channel support through government and development partners, civil society and NGOs into a people-oriented disaster management and risk reduction partnership (Haque & Uddin, 2013). In particular the CDMP sees working with NGOs as crucial to developing the capacities of local government structures at the union and sub-district level. The CDMP has not been without its challenges, including: sustaining political leadership through changes in staffing; maintaining operational resilience through recurrent disasters; and demonstrating impact at the community level (Luxbacher, 2011).

Although there are still clear issues in terms of capacity, particularly at the sub-national level, Bangladesh has made substantial progress both in terms of its institutional frameworks and disaster management policy. These developments are widely seen by actors in Bangladesh as contributing to a dramatic fall in the number of lives lost to cyclical disasters, in particular cyclones and floods. But major challenges clearly remain, many relating to wider development challenges. Tracing the shift to a disaster management discourse focused on preparedness and mitigation through institutional partnerships, Haque & Uddin decry 'the absence of stable and transparent institutions' that means that much change has remained hypothetical and that a only a very limited culture of partnership has yet been established. The institutional and governance challenges facing Bangladesh fall outside the scope of this study, yet Haque & Uddin's assessment that 'divisive partisan politics and the lack of good governance' prevent effective partnerships is echoed in the perspectives of respondents in this research, and these inhibiting factors limit the success of networks.

### **International Structures and Mechanisms**

Ongoing extreme poverty and a range of developmental challenges ensure the large-scale presence of international actors in the country, and the continued inflow of Overseas Development Assistance, totalling \$1.4bn in 2010, or 1.4% of the country's GNI (GHA, 2012). Fundamentally, the international presence in Bangladesh operates in a development paradigm, which is reflected in the key international structures that exist in the country.

The UN country team (UNCT) consists of representatives from 17 UN agencies, funds and programmes, and operates under the leadership of the UN Resident Coordinator (RC). The UNCT meets monthly, under the chairmanship of the RC, discussing issues of common interest

across a wide range of areas, including humanitarian issues when relevant. Heads of individual UN agencies are responsible for decision-making and policy direction in their individual agencies, with the UNCT meetings serving as ‘a forum for inter-agency discussions aimed at optimizing and harmonizing the UN System’s synergies at country-level.’<sup>1</sup>

Another relevant structure in the country is the Local Consultative Group (LCG). Primarily a forum for the coordination of donors, the LCG forms the main platform for dialogue between the government of Bangladesh and its ‘Development Partners’, defined as bilateral and multilateral development donors, international agencies and organisations, as well as international NGOs. The LCG Plenary is co-chaired by the Secretary of the Government Economic Relations Division and the UN RC, with the latter also leading the LCG’s Executive Committee.

There are number of LCG Working Groups, through which the body seeks to coordinate action across a number of sectors, and these include representatives from international NGOs. This includes a LCG Working Group on Disaster and Emergency Response (known as LCG-DER), formed in 2001 at the behest of the RC in his role as chair of the UN Disaster Management Team, and with the objective of acting as a common platform for disaster management and to promote ownership and leadership from the government, including through partnership with civil society. The role of the LCG-DER is described and formalised within the government’s SOD.

There is currently no Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in Bangladesh. The absence of an OCHA office is a reflection of the increased capacity of state actors and their ability to coordinate response, but also reflects the ongoing sensitivity within the state to the presence of formal humanitarian architecture. This particularly relates to ongoing tensions in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and associated humanitarian needs, a politically sensitive issue both nationally and internationally. OCHA placed a Humanitarian Advisor in the country in 2012, playing an advisory role to the office of the Resident Coordinator and focusing on supporting the development of improved humanitarian coordination mechanisms and structures, in particular building links between the government (and specifically MDMR) and the wide range of actors working on humanitarian issues in the country.

The lack of formal humanitarian architecture in the country includes the absence of a Humanitarian Country Team, or individual clusters. Nonetheless, in recognition of the need to improve the coordination between actors during periods of emergency, new structures have been established, most notably the Humanitarian Coordination Task Team (HCTT), convened under the auspices of LCG-DER in 2012.

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.un-bd.org/index\\_co.php](http://www.un-bd.org/index_co.php) for more details of development focused UN structures in the country.

In many ways the creation of the HCTT is an evolution of the LCG-DER. In addition to providing a platform for coordination between a range of government, international and national actors, by feeding up into the structures of the LCG-DER, the HCTT also aims to give humanitarian actors of all types the possibility to contribute to policy development and decision-making. The HCTT largely resembles the operations of a Humanitarian Country Team, co-chaired by the government and the UN, and operating above sectoral clusters, described by interviewees as 'quasi-clusters' and 'the cluster system in all but name.' The HCTT also seeks to involve NGOs, with one seat reserved for a national actor, currently Bangladesh Disaster Preparedness Centre (BDPC). It is perhaps too early to judge either the overall success of the HCTT, or its specific ability to include national NGO actors in its discussions and decision-making, but the inclusion of BDPC is an explicit attempt to achieve this, with the aspiration that the organisation would be able to consult with its own 'network' of partners, in order to present collective positions. This interest came from those international actors seeking to strengthen these mechanisms (particularly OCHA), and assumed an existing prevalence of networked forms of action.

## **Humanitarian Partnership and Collaboration**

Bangladesh also plays host to numerous partnerships and collaborations aimed at improving the performance of humanitarian action in the country. This includes a diverse range of actors, but is perhaps typified by the bilateral implementation relationships that exist between international and national NGOs in the country.

The existence of implementation partnerships between international and national NGOs is in no way new or unique to Bangladesh, but appears to be particularly prevalent in the country, with many (although not all) of the major international NGOs operating humanitarian programmes choosing to do so through local partners. Oxfam, for example, has been operating in Bangladesh since 1970 and currently conducts all of its humanitarian programme implementation through partners, typically comprising local people's organisations, NGOs, or other actors, such as the private sector. Many of these relationships are long-standing and run over multiple years, ideally contributing to an ongoing increase in the capacity of national actors. In addition to these humanitarian implementation partnerships, Oxfam also works with a wide range of national actors to campaign on specific development or social issues, for instances playing a central role in the Campaign for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods, and the 'We Can' campaign to end violence against women.

This picture is broadly repeated by other international NGOs, with ongoing and often long-term bilateral partnerships governing the implementation of services during periods of disaster,

while other relationships exist focusing on campaigning and advocacy issues. Regarding implementation, although some of the biggest national NGOs are able to implement largely independently of international (or national) partners, a number of large, increasingly capable national organisations have emerged whose business model is largely dependent on their position as programme implementers on behalf of international organisations (both NGOs and others). People's Oriented Program Implementation (POPI), for example, is a large national NGO, which has grown over 25 years from operating in a single village to serving more than half a million people across 16 districts, with nearly 2000 staff and many thousands of volunteers. It implements programmes in both humanitarian and development sectors, and has worked as an implementation partner for a wide range of international NGOs and UN agencies, as well as receiving funding directly from donors.<sup>2</sup> It is a partner in Oxfam's International Humanitarian Capacity Building project, and was selected as long-term partner for CARE Bangladesh, as it seeks to build more long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships with national actors in Bangladesh.<sup>3</sup>

These examples may point to bilateral partnerships that are working to boost the capacity of local actors, but undeniably challenges remain. A recent evaluation of the European Commission's humanitarian activities in Bangladesh noted the close links between national and international NGOs in the country. It concluded that the quality of local capacity remains inadequate, and monitoring systems 'casual', with limited knowledge of humanitarian principles among some local NGOs. At the same time, the evaluation also saw the need for a 'carefully arranged space' for local NGOs, in order to allow them to implement programmes more independently and bring 'innovation and creativity' (EC/AGED, 2012).

A specific finding of this case study is that existing inter-relationships between national and international actors are not fully recognized or exploited. This is despite the high level of interconnectivity between national NGOs and their international partners (with a number of national NGOs in bilateral partnership with the same group of international NGOs). Instead, even where they are numerous, these ties are largely seen in isolation as bilateral ties, rather than as offering the potential to build networks for knowledge sharing and the promotion of mutual accountability.

This finding is particularly surprising given the high level of collaboration between international NGOs operating in Bangladesh, with international actors repeatedly citing work by

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<sup>2</sup> A full list of the current projects (both development and humanitarian), and their respective donors is maintained here:

[http://www.popibd.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=62&Itemid=73](http://www.popibd.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=62&Itemid=73)

<sup>3</sup> More information on CARE Bangladesh's approach to partnership in the country can be found here:

the Emergency Capacity Building (ECB) project and the recently formed National Alliance for Risk Reduction and Response Initiative (NARRI) consortium, consisting of eight international NGOs working on DRR and Response in Bangladesh.<sup>4</sup>

ECB in Bangladesh has undertaken work both to boost the emergency response capacity of its member agencies, and to improve the humanitarian system in Bangladesh more generally. In particular this has included working alongside CDMP to improve knowledge of humanitarian principles and accountability, as well as to assist in building the capacity of state structures at the local level (Bannerman, Rashid, & Rejve, 2011). More recently, ECB has been working with the Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS) to promote the use of joint needs assessments, conducted within the framework of the LCG-DER and latterly the HCTT, thus involving a wide range of international actors and the government, and widely seen as a successful and positive development.

More recently, the NARRI consortium has emerged as an important structure, promoting closer links between international NGOs. Essentially, a donor-funding consortium channelling money from Education, Charitable and Humanitarian Organization (ECHO), NARRI aims to leverage economies of scale and increase the coverage of response activities, working both on DRR and supporting coordinated emergency response. Like the work of ECB, it was widely cited as an example of networking and collaboration by international NGOs in Bangladesh, both internally and through the consortium's relationships with other actors. Given the increased reliability of funding for those agencies involved in the consortium, it will doubtless provide them with the space and scope to think beyond individual project delivery to the wider context in which humanitarian action is taking place. Others highlighted the donor-driven nature of the consortium, and questioned its commitment to deliver assistance in line with the needs of specific communities, with response priorities instead following pre-agreed divisions between agencies. Although many projects funded through the consortium will doubtless be implemented by national NGOs, they are notable in their absence from its formal structures.

Looking at the nature of the relationships and partnerships ongoing in Bangladesh, a mixed picture emerges. The structures that exist are broadly seen as having a positive impact, in reducing risk and building greater preparedness, but also during response. National NGOs undeniably play an essential role in the functioning of the humanitarian system in the country, primarily as implementing agencies. Despite this, and recognising that partnerships may go beyond simple 'sub-contracting', the links between national and international actors appear to

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<sup>4</sup> Consortium members include ActionAid International, CARE International, Concern Universal, Concern Worldwide, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Oxfam GB, Plan International, and Solidarities International, with HelpAge International and Handicap International as the technical partners,

continue to be seen as bilateral – rather than recognising the links that already exist between organisations or succeeding in bringing national actors into collaborative initiatives at the national level.

There are, of course, exceptions to this, which speak to the potential of more meaningful collaborative relationships linking national and international actors. One example is the CARE-led Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development Opportunities (SHOUHARDO) project, the first phase of which ran from 2005 through 2009, and which was a developmentally orientated programme to reduce chronic and transitory food insecurity across 18 districts. The programme aimed to foster links between partner organizations, spanning NGOs from the local level up, as well as regional level actors such as the Asian Disaster Preparedness Centre. Although not an original aim of the programme, fostering such collaborative relationships led to the development of one of the national level networks explored in more detail in the next section.

## **Networks and humanitarian response in Bangladesh**

The environment for the networks explored below is in many ways a microcosm of the environment for civil society in the country more generally: NGOs occupy a vital role in public life, but are not immune from the institutional and governance challenges facing state and other actors.

There are a variety of networks, associations and other structures linking NGOs and other development actors in Bangladesh, spanning a range of sectors and issues, perhaps as a consequence of the relative weakness of state structures, and the vibrancy and breadth of civil society actors. Although many of these are of little relevance here, it is important to note the prevalence of such structures and that, in some cases, they cut across development and disaster response.

The NGO Coordination Council for Climate Change (NC4), for example, has over 100 members, and exists in an attempt to create a common platform for local, national and international organisations around climate change issues. NC4 works on knowledge sharing, policy development and advocacy, and promoting community level adaptation. As well as working on issues related to disaster preparedness and risk reduction, it is also linked to the disaster management community through the Bangladesh Disaster Preparedness Centre (BDPC), who host the NC4 secretariat.

Other networks have fewer apparent links to humanitarian response concerns, for instance the Equity and Justice Working Group, better known as EquityBD, a smaller network of NGOs, CSOs,

and activists. Its main focus is economic justice and human rights, but it also works on DRR and climate justice. EquityBD's secretariat function is in turn hosted by COAST trust, whose work includes both DRR and response.

Finally, another very different network is the Bangladesh NGOs Network for Radio Communication (BNNRC). BNNRC connects NGOs and CSOs across Bangladesh in order to promote approaches that bring information and communication technologies into the centre of development efforts, and works both to support community level radio as well as conducting national level advocacy, and acting as an important knowledge repository. The importance of access to information in disaster preparedness has also led to BNNRC's engagement in the development of systems to ensure that community radio (and other channels such as SMS) functions to provide essential hazard and disaster information, in collaboration with a number of humanitarian and disaster response actors.

Although a detailed examination of the form and function of these networks (and others) is not within the scope of this study, it is nonetheless important to recognise their relevance. The features that have potential implications for networking in Bangladesh more generally including:

- The important function they appear to play in national level advocacy and policy dialogue. Although the breadth of their work makes generalisation difficult, there appears to be a strong focus on the use of the networks to engage with and shape national level policy debates on the issues with which they are concerned.
- The relatively high level of focus of networks such as BNNRC and NC4, who have a strong thematic concentration, which they are then able to pursue through a number of different channels.
- The relative strength of these network's central bodies, whether or not they constitute a formal secretariat. Despite the fact the both N4C and EquityBD are hosted by member organisations, all these networks appear to have strong administrative bodies, characterised by the activities they conduct on behalf of their memberships.
- Finally, these networks appear to have strong international links, either connecting to international actors in Bangladesh or directly with international initiatives. EquityBD, for example, includes international organisations in its membership, and is linked to a number of international networks and alliances such as the Asia-Pacific Research Network and the Jubilee South Campaign. BNNRC has Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN.



## **Humanitarian Networks**

Perhaps one of the most significant distinctions between the disaster response community and wider civil society in Bangladesh is the relative prominence of international actors in the disaster response sphere. These structures, notably the HCTT in relation to coordination and the NARRI Consortium as a funding channel, play a central role in humanitarian activities in the country, and include only a limited role for national NGOs. Although not formally networks, they display the characteristics of networked structures (notably through attempts to enhance the exchange of information and build trust) and, more importantly, fulfil functions similar to those that might be fulfilled by networks – most notably in their roles as conduits for information and resources. Despite this, there exist a small number of other networks serving national actors in Bangladesh.

### **NIRAPAD**

One of the most important networks with a specific focus on humanitarian issues is the Network for Information Response and Preparedness Activities on Disaster (NIRAPAD), launched in 1997 by CARE Bangladesh as an offshoot of the SHOUHARDO profiled above. It is focused on providing support services to disaster risk management agencies in Bangladesh.

NIRAPAD currently has 23 full voting members, of which CARE Bangladesh remains one, with the vast majority being national NGOs. Membership is seen as crucial to the relevance and sustainability of the network – active engagement (rather than ‘extraction’) is a prerequisite for membership, and two years observer membership is required before organisations can attain full membership. The nine-person secretariat is overseen by an Executive Committee consisting of eight representatives from the membership, elected on a rotating basis, and who guide the direction of the network. NIRAPAD also benefits from a number of honorary advisors, a number of whom represent international NGOs in the country.

NIRAPAD charges a nominal membership fee – primarily to maintain member engagement rather than to fund the network’s activities. Instead the network has pursued an innovative funding model based on subsidising its networking activities by conducting research, policy and training consultancy work, primarily working on behalf of international NGOs operating in the country. This has, for example, included coordinating an ECB and IFRC Training of Trainers on the Sphere Standards, and producing a 2011 Oxfam Bangladesh Handbook on Women’s Leadership in Disaster Risk Management.<sup>5</sup>

By generating income through such activities, NIRAPAD is able to cross-subsidise what it sees as its central functions in service of its membership and the wider humanitarian community in

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<sup>5</sup> Available at: <http://www.undp.org/crmi/docs/oxfam-womenleaderdr-td-2011-en.pdf>

Bangladesh. These functions are categorised by the network as knowledge management, capacity development and humanitarian advocacy.

- Knowledge management includes the ongoing collection and dissemination of information on specific crises, and the publication of Situation Reports after specific disaster events, disseminated to both national and international agencies.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the secretariat conducts research on specific issues of concern to its members (such as reactive policy positions on periodic issues of concern) and supports Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) of member activities.
- Capacity Development includes the provision of training services on issues including humanitarian standards, disaster management, and the development of M&E systems. The provision of training services commercially is used to subsidise training for members. NIRAPAD also supports Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) of member's disaster response and risk reduction activities, including conducting evaluations.
- Humanitarian Advocacy work for NIRAPAD comprises both efforts to engage in dialogue with government and other actors on issues of concern, and efforts to more broadly convene actors, share information, and seek to build consensus.

NIRAPAD appeared to be the most vibrant network primarily seeking to serve national NGOs and, although it serves a relatively small membership, it appears to be successful at ensuring real engagement and building a community among this group. This success has been made possible both by maintaining strong governance structures and norms (which, for example, limit the benefits an organisation can receive from membership of NIRAPAD's Executive Committee), and seeking to limit the potential for the network to become a forum for competition. Its ongoing relationship with international actors, who provide the network's main source of income, appears to be significant and may be a relevant model from which others can learn. It has also remained relatively focused in the ranges of issues it engages with and the services it provides to its membership, in an effort to remain relevant and avoid mission creep.

### **Disaster Forum**

Disaster Forum, founded in Dhaka in 1994, describes itself as a national disaster preparedness network, working to ensure the accountability of humanitarian and development agencies in the country and to promote the rights of vulnerable people. Central to the vision and mission of Disaster Forum has been the promotion of an alternative perspective on Disaster Mitigation, against the 'dominant perspective', as outlined in the table below:

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<sup>6</sup> NIRAPAD sit-reps are available at: <http://reliefweb.int/organization/nirapad>

<b>'Dominant Perspective'</b>	<b>'Alternative Perspective'</b>
Disasters and conflicts viewed as isolated events.	Disasters and conflict are part of the normal process of development.
The disaster cycle is seen as detached from other processes in society, so they are rarely analysed together.	Analysing links between the disaster cycle and wider social processes seen as crucial to understanding disaster and conflicts.
Technical and legal solutions are dominant.	Emphasis is on solutions that change relationships and structures in society. The objective is to reduce people's vulnerability and strength their capacity.
Centralised institutions dominate intervention strategies. Less participation of people, who are treated as passive 'victims' during crises.	Decentralised institutions play a much greater role. Participation of people is paramount with people treated as 'partners' and agents in their development.
Implementing agencies are less accountable and transparent, particularly to the people they serve.	Ensuring accountability and transparency is emphasised throughout the programme cycle.
Interventions happen as a response to specific event – after the event.	Mitigation of disasters and conflict are core aims of interventions.
Interventions are intended to return to the pre-disaster state.	Disaster /conflicts viewed as opportunities for social transformation.

([www.disasterforum.org](http://www.disasterforum.org))

Initially bringing together 25 organizations, Disaster Forum now has 70 members. These include programme-focused national NGOs, government agencies, donors, researchers and academics, as well as a category of individual membership. A 15-member Executive Committee is selected periodically from the membership (both individuals and organisations) and is responsible for formulating the network's policies and activities in consultation with the wider membership.

Undertaking activities that are intend to improve both community level preparedness and national level policy debates, the functions that Disaster Forum seeks to perform are in many ways similar to those outlined above in relation to NIRAPAD, with a particular focus on knowledge management and information sharing. This includes research on specific disaster

issues and the production of an annual review of disasters in Bangladesh, previously funded by ECHO. Disaster Forum has also produced guides and reviews in relation to specific programming issues: it was commissioned to translate and disseminate the Sphere Handbook into Bangla. Disaster Forum previously sought to monitor disasters in the country and produce Situation Reports in response to specific emergencies, although this role appears to have been taken over by NIRAPAD in recent years. Disaster Forum also appears to previously have both developed training material and conducted training on issues such as flood shelter management.

On paper, Disaster Forum appears in many ways the archetype of a national network serving humanitarian and disaster management agencies. The network is structured so as to be led by its membership through an Executive Committee. Despite this, the research for this study uncovered questions from respondents (including members) as to whether Disaster Forum in reality functioned as a network. This was particularly given the perceived strength and autonomy of its central organising body, and lack of rotation in its governance and leadership structures. Like many networks in Bangladesh and elsewhere, funding remains a challenge, and some respondents (although not all) suggested that Disaster Forum has been forced to pursue funding at the expense of remaining relevant to its members.

### **Bangladesh Disaster Preparedness Centre (BDPC)**

A final prominent organisation operating in Bangladesh, and relevant to a discussion of national level networks, is the Bangladesh Disaster Preparedness Centre (BDPC). Founded in 1992, BDPC sees itself as the first local Bangladeshi NGO focused solely on disaster risk reduction (DRR), and cites the devastating floods that hit the country in 1988 and 1991 as important drivers in its formation, along with the recognition that communities' vulnerabilities were not being addressed in response efforts. Against this backdrop, BDPC has worked to put vulnerable communities at the centre of disaster management, adopting a community-based approach complemented by advocacy, policy advice and knowledge sharing.

BDPC is registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau, and sees itself as an independent NGO focused on policy development and advocacy rather than programme implementation. It is governed and led through a General Committee, comprised of 17 members and responsible for adopting policy decisions and approval of the activities of the seven member Executive Committee, in turn responsible for the smooth operation and overall management of the organisation, and chaired by BDPC's Director, Muhammad Saidur Rahman.

A largely non-operational agency focused on disaster preparedness and DRR, BDPC has been involved in work to develop national and local level response structures, and to promote more

resilient livelihoods among coastal communities through efforts to improve governance. But BDPC has also been involved in projects more readily associated with programme delivery, for instance developing the community ownership component of a Swiss Development Cooperation project to construct cyclone shelters. This work is in addition to policy and advocacy work that seeks to link local, national and international concerns.

BDPC does not describe itself as a network: it does not have the structural attributes associated with the other inter-organisational networks looked at as part of this study, and crucially lacks a formal membership. Nonetheless, BDPC was described by a range of national and international actors as sustaining an important network, linking national and international organisations, and drawing in the concerns of local actors. BDPC also plays a more formal role in national level coordination structures and debates that might otherwise be fulfilled by a network organisation.

BDPC is the only national organisation to have a formal role in the HCTT, sitting alongside the three international NGOs in the structure. This is despite the organisation not having a formal role in humanitarian response, either at the programmatic or policy level. In the interviews, some saw this lack of a formal role as a result of the political profile of the organisation, while others referred to it as a result of the convening role of the organisation and its 'network' of organisations, particularly at the local level.

An interesting recent development for BDPC has been the launch of the UNDP project for Strengthening Local Disaster Management Practices through Government Organisations Partnerships. The project, launched in May 2013, aims to develop partnerships between government and NGO actors in order to strengthen local Disaster Management Committees in vulnerable areas. It involves the formation and support of the 'Network of NGOs' at the national level, with the explicit goal of improving government and national NGO coordination at the field level (BDPC, 2013).

BDPC has sought to cultivate its position connecting actors across organisations and levels of operation. It has consistently engaged with regional level networks and structures, including ADRRN, international mechanisms such as the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (ISDR), and the Disaster Management Committee of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation – the body bringing together states in South Asia. At the national level, the organisation has sought to maintain close relationships with various national structures, lately the CDMP but also including relationships with district, *upazila* and union level Disaster Management Committees, and government agencies. In addition to building strong informal links with a range of national NGOs, BDPC has also been in more formal networking activities, for

example playing host to the NC4 network on climate change issues, described in more detail above. Finally, BDPC has a network with a large number of micro-level organizations, which others see as giving the organisation the credibility to speak to local level concerns at the national level, giving it relevance, for example in the HCTT.

BDPC present something of a paradox when looking at networks in Bangladesh – performing network functions such as knowledge management and amplification and advocacy, but lacking a network structure. Nonetheless, looking at its how it has achieved success is insightful when looking at the successes and challenges for networks more generally.

## **Successes**

Although only a small number of formal networks focused on humanitarian response or DRR were identified during the research, and without ignoring the constraints these networks appear to be facing, successes were identified and cited by respondents as demonstrating the value and further potential of networks in Bangladesh. Even where challenges existing in attributing success to a particular network, areas where they appear to have had a particular contribution include: knowledge management; efforts to build the capacity of national member organisations; advocacy; and the amplification of community level organisations.

Perhaps most tangibly, networks have played a role in information and knowledge management around humanitarian and DRR issues in the country. Disaster Forum and NIRAPAD have both produced situation reports and updates in response to specific events, and national and international NGOs noted their relevance and their wide dissemination through email lists. In addition to this reactive work, the experience of members and local level organisations appears to have been drawn on to inform the development of good practices and policy documents, as well as guidance and training, capturing local knowledge and transferring ideas and practice from elsewhere.

Much of the work undertaken by NIRAPAD in this area also relates to their efforts to build knowledge and technical capacities in specific areas, through the development of guidance and training materials. This appears to have been particularly successful in raising awareness of international humanitarian standards, including the HAP and Sphere standards, the latter being initially translated into Bangla by Disaster Forum. More broadly, network members reported the potential benefits in terms of access to knowledge, and opportunities to develop new skills and capacities as a motivating factor for their continued engagement with networks, particularly NIRAPAD.

A number of respondents highlighted the role networks have played in bringing about policy change around disaster response and preparedness issues in Bangladesh, and Disaster Forum,

NIRAPAD and BDPC all engage in advocacy at the national level, the latter also as part of the work of NC4, which it hosts. Recent years have also seen the continued development of legal and institutional frameworks for disaster management in the government of Bangladesh, and networks appear to have played an ongoing positive role in this. The extent of this change has been such that many policies and priorities now more closely resemble the ‘alternative view’ promoted by Disaster Forum than the ‘dominant view’ it was formed to challenge.

Although a wide range of advocacy approaches can be seen, including developing and advocating for specific policy changes through direct lobbying and campaigning, these efforts appear to have been most successful when they draw on and promote the views of members organisations operating within communities. NIRAPAD and Disaster Forum both saw this as important, but it is BDPCs work to draw on a ‘network of NGOs’ at the local level, and promote their perspectives nationally and internationally. These links have been particularly successful in building the reputation of the Bangladeshi NGO sector internationally, particularly through its contribution to considerable successes in reducing the toll of disasters in the country.

## **Challenges**

The policy and programming context in Bangladesh has changed dramatically since the 1990s, the period in which NIRAPAD, Disaster Forum and BDPC emerged. Many of the policies and priorities of the government of Bangladesh have developed since this period. While this may, in some ways, demonstrate the success of networks such as Disaster Forum in bringing about change at the national level, it also highlights the challenges faced by networks in maintaining their relevance and sustaining their operating models.

The challenges of building sustainable national networks manifest themselves in a number of ways, but are closely tied to the funding environment for national organisation in the country – in particular, project funding models prevalent in the country (and elsewhere). This in turn impacts on the ability of national actors to provide meaningful financial support to national level networks, and creates an effective reliance on international actors and particularly NGOs. The innovative funding model created by NIRAPAD, supplementing a nominal membership fee by providing consultancy services to a range of non-members, is an interesting and potentially important model, which has so far proved successful for the network. But, as NIRAPAD itself recognises, this approach is not without risks – notably that the activities the secretariat performs will become detached from the interests of the membership, or be seen as serving the secretariat rather than the membership.

The danger of a secretariat or other coordinating body becoming detached from the membership is all too apparent, and can be seen both in humanitarian networks and broader

collaborations in Bangladesh. Many interviewees described in general terms seeing networks (of all types) used by a single organisation in an attempt to generate income, for example by exploiting positions in network governance structures. The Executive Director of one mid-sized Bangladeshi NGO described the collective decision of a group of NGOs *not* to form an explicit network around humanitarian accountability issues, due to the risk that this might damage the productive collaboration that is taking place currently.

This example also highlights the tension between the need to have formalised structures seen as transparent and accountable, and the importance of having flexible and dynamic structures that create value in *the links between* organisations. Network growth inevitably weakens ties between members, but the high degree of formality in the networks identified (both NIRAPAD and Disaster Forum are, for example, registered as NGOs with the NGO Affairs Bureau) speaks to wider issues of credibility and corruption in the country, and a genuine desire to maintain the highest standards of practice. It may however also tend to encourage strong secretariat bodies with a high level of agency at the expense of collective action by the membership, particularly where strong legal structures are not combined with suitable governance and norms that can facilitate simple and open network relationships.

A challenge that was raised repeatedly, particularly by national actors and Bangladeshis working for international agencies, was sustainable leadership. Many noted that strong individual leadership, particularly when combined with political connections, was important for getting the activities seen and heard, and building the profile of a network. The achievements of BDPC under the leadership of Muhammad Saidur Rahman were consistently cited in this regard. But it was also noted that, in regard to networks, there was a risk that strong leadership could potentially stifle the open debate essential to the vibrancy of a network. The challenge was also expressed in relation to institutional leadership, and it was notable in the research for this study that many of the larger Bangladeshi NGOs appeared to have only limited engagement with networks, instead seeking to engage bilaterally when needed and exploiting informal networks based on kinship, place of birth, political affiliation, and religion (Ahmed, 2010)

A final challenge, and one that appears to be particular to the humanitarian and disaster response sphere, is the continued high profile role for international actors, and the important role for international structures and collaborations, most notably the recently created HCTT and the NAARI Consortium. This is, in part, an inevitable feature of a functioning international humanitarian system capable of delivering international assistance in a coordinated manner, but it also limits the space open for national level collaborations and networks, particularly in relation to response. Rather than an issue of how national NGOs can compete with those serving



the relationship between government and international agencies, this may be more usefully defined as the challenge of finding ways for national NGOs to increase their knowledge of and voice in them.

## **Emerging Conclusions**

Even in the context of the ongoing changes taking place in Bangladeshi society, and the implications for NGOs and civil society, the structures designed to manage the risk of and response to disasters have evolved dramatically in recent years, and the outcomes of these changes are yet to be fully seen. In particular, the continued development of the CDMP, the formation of the HCTT, and the growth of the NARRI Consortium will all have important implications for the collaborations between actors working on humanitarian and disaster risk issues. It is still unclear what these developments will mean for national NGOs in particular, as they seek to increase their influence on policy and programme in Bangladesh. This developing context notwithstanding, a number of emerging conclusions can be drawn from the challenging experiences of those trying to foster networks serving indigenous humanitarian action in the country.

Given the structures that have developed, it seems clear that networks focus solely or largely on national actors in Bangladesh will struggle to compete with those serving the relationship between state and international actors, particularly while the latter remain the centre of funding and policy decision-making. The focus then for national networks must instead be to push for a greater role for national NGOs in structures such as the HCTT, which in turn are dependent on their ability to present collective positions and not maintain a distinctive presence. The role of international actors in facilitating this will also be crucial to ensuring the input of national organisations is included in such structures.

Funding will remain a key issue, and will be an essential part of building the community needed to advocate collectively at the national level. In the medium term, international actors will remain the key sources of funding, and it will be fascinating to monitor the success of the model NIRAPAD is pursuing to fund its activities, while remaining a network primarily supporting national NGOs. Beyond this, working to recognise the interconnections (rather than bilateral ties) that already exist between national actors and their international counterparts may be an important way of demonstrating the potential for increased use of networks and new forms of collaboration. Simple analysis of these relationship using Social Network Analysis tools may well uncover a range of existing links that currently are not recognised or exist only as tacit, informal networks.

Other networks, particularly those focused on development and climate change issues, appear to have been successful building links with networks and organisations outside of Bangladesh. Creating such links appears to be valuable for national level networks, both in reinforcing their credibility and giving them access to new knowledge and expertise. It is also notable that BDPC has been successful in fostering such international links, reinforcing its position as one of the primary national actors working on disaster issues. For other national humanitarian networks, exploring the costs and benefits of building stronger international links could prove valuable. The success Bangladesh has achieved in reducing disaster risk over recent decades provides ample scope for engaging internationally.

Given the constrained space for national level networks, and the limited funding available, a choice may need to be made between network forms that seek primarily to serve a small group of committed members, versus those that try to engage with as wide a group of relevant actors as possible. In both cases, caution must be shown in the extent to which network secretariats or coordinating bodies develop their own agency, at the expense of efforts to exploit and build on the links between their members. In all cases, having strong dynamic governance structures are needed to maintain dynamism and ensure the functions that a network performs reflect the priorities and interests of their membership.

A consistent issue raised in the research for this case study related the nature of the leadership needed to sustain and promote national networks and the interests of civil society actors working to limit the impact of disasters in Bangladesh. Many highlighted the need for charismatic, politically engaged leadership to ensure access to decision-makers, and to raise the profile of organisations. At the same time, others cited the risk of networks being captured, either for political gain or the enrichment of organisations – lack of transparency and renewal in network governance structures was seen as a key element of this. It may be the case that, while leadership is crucial to the success of networks, new models and styles of leadership will be needed to sustainably promote the interests of both networks and their members.

## **Annex: Network structures in Bangladesh**

<b>Network</b>	<b>Purpose and goals</b>	<b>Membership</b>	<b>Structure</b>	<b>Core Functions</b>
<b>Network for Information Response and Preparedness Activities on Disaster (NIRAPAD)</b>	Launched in 1997 by CARE Bangladesh as an offshoot of their Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development Opportunities (SHOUHARDO) project. It is focused on providing support services to disaster risk management agencies in Bangladesh, with the aim of supporting agencies to strengthen their progress in the fields of Disaster Risk Management and Climate Change Adaptation.	NIRAPAD currently has 23 full voting members, of which CARE Bangladesh remains one. Active engagement is seen as crucial to the relevance and sustainability of the network – rather than ‘extraction’. NIRAPAD charges a nominal membership fee – primarily to maintain member engagement rather than fund the network’s activities.	The nine-person secretariat is overseen by an Executive Committee consisting of eight representatives from the membership, selected on a rotating basis, who guide the direction of the network. NIRAPAD also benefits from a number of honorary advisors, a number of whom represent international NGOs in the country.	Through consultancy services, NIRAPAD subsidises its central functions, categorised by the network as knowledge management, capacity development and humanitarian advocacy.
<b>Disaster Forum</b>	Disaster Forum, founded in Dhaka in 1994, describes itself as a national disaster preparedness network, working to ensure the accountability of humanitarian and development agencies in the country and to promote the rights of vulnerable people. Central to the vision and mission of Disaster Forum has been the promotion of an alternative perspective on	Initially bringing together 25 organizations, Disaster Forum now has 70 members. These include programme-focused national NGOs, government agencies, donors, researchers and academics, as well as a category of individual membership.	A 15-member Executive Committee is selected periodically from the membership (both individuals and organisations) and is responsible for formulating the network’s policies and activities in consultation with the wider membership.	Functions focus on knowledge management and information sharing. Previously, information was shared through Situation Reports in response to specific emergencies. Disaster Forum also appears to previously have both developed training material and conducting training.

	Disaster Management, focused on communities and the reduction of risk.			
<b>Bangladesh Disaster Preparedness Centre (BDPC)</b>	Founded in 1992, BDPC sees itself as the first local Bangladeshi NGO focused solely on disaster risk reduction (DRR). BDPC vision is to reduce the risks of people vulnerable to disasters by empowering them to establish their rights.	BDPC is not a membership-based organisation, and does not see itself as a formal network. BDPC is registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau, and sees itself as an independent NGO. BDPC has a network linking national and international organisations.	BDPC is governed and led through two structures: a 17-member General Committee, responsible for adopting policy decisions and approval of the activities of the seven-member Executive Committee, in turn responsible for the smooth operation and overall management of the organisation, and chaired by BDPC's Director. Plays a more formal role in national level coordination structures.	Performing network functions such as knowledge management and amplification and advocacy, but lacking a network structure.

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