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# **Policy Challenges towards Rohingya Crisis in Bangladesh**

*The Role of National Development Experts*

Bulbul Siddiqi and Palash Kamruzzaman

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# Policy Challenges towards Rohingya Crisis in Bangladesh: The Role of National Development Experts

## Abstract

The Rohingya crisis constitutes one of the most significant humanitarian concerns of the current world. Nearly one million Rohingya live in the congested camps of Cox's Bazar, making it the largest displacement camp in a non-conflict environment. The government of Bangladesh and the international community are offering some much-needed humanitarian support to this vulnerable group of people. However, the enormity and complex nature of the crisis have also created space for researchers, academics, and activists to get involved in the quest for a dignified and sustainable solution and/or to secure justice for the crimes against the Rohingyas. Based on 25 qualitative interviews with development professionals working on Rohingya issues, this paper explores to what extent these experts can play a meaningful role in resolving this crisis. Our evidence suggests that a nonchalant non-responsive practice limits the role of experts towards finding a dignified solution to the crisis. Additionally, for national development experts (NDEs) as opposed to international experts, the space is further confined. Our findings also reveal that the lack of an evidence-based policy culture further complicates the Rohingya crisis as locally derived expertise is often ignored in policy recommendations when seeking a durable yet dignified solution to the Rohingya crisis.

**Keywords:** Rohingya crisis, Policymaking, National Development Experts, International Development Experts,

## Introduction

The Rohingya represent one of the most persecuted groups of people in the current world. The Rohingya crisis constitutes the fourth-largest displaced population from a single country of origin, and most of them are hosted in Bangladesh (UN, 2019). According to the Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) Situation Report on the Rohingya Refugee Crisis, 911,359 Rohingya were staying in the camps in Cox's Bazar as of April 30, 2019 (ISCG, 2019). This large number of the Rohingya entered Bangladesh in 2017, but Bangladesh has witnessed a Rohingya influx since the late 1970s. A significant number of the Rohingya were repatriated in the previous episodes of the Rohingya influx in Bangladesh. There were two registered camps for the Rohingya in Cox's Bazar comprising those who had been officially recognised as refugees by the government of Bangladesh. However, the Rohingya who forcibly entered Bangladesh in 2017 were not recognised as refugees; instead, the GoB defined them as Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN). The crisis intensified when two initiatives of the Rohingya repatriation failed due to the lack of cooperation from Myanmar. It has also an impact on the bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

The Rohingya crisis is now in its fourth year. In 2017, although the government of Bangladesh (GoB) provided shelter to the vulnerable Rohingya for humanitarian reasons, a moderate

change in tone is visible in recent times where the GoB is often seen describing the Rohingya as a “burden”<sup>1</sup>.

The government of Bangladesh is supported by about 130 national and international development organisations (commonly known as NGOs) working in the various Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar (Khan, 2018). Despite the coordinated efforts of the GoB and these agencies, the voluntary, dignified and safe repatriation of the Rohingya seem to be a distant reality. The sheer volume of the task to manage the crisis is overwhelming, and the Bangladeshi government has been working to ensure swift yet safe and dignified repatriation for the vulnerable Rohingya. The roles of the international community can also be questioned for not exerting enough pressure on Myanmar to take the Rohingya back. Thus, a durable and dignified resolution of the crisis depends on the complex geopolitical context of the region. In this context, alongside the GoB and various national and international organisations, ‘development experts’ are continuing their roles in supporting the Rohingya, offering support in the form of access to education, primary health and various skills/capacity-building activities, among others.

Taking the Rohingya crisis as a case study, this paper aims to deepen the critical scholarship of international development by looking at the creative roles of the actors commonly known as national development experts (NDEs) by analysing their roles in mitigating the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh and contrasting this with the roles of international development experts. For conceptual clarity, we have considered the national development experts (NDEs) as a social category that include academics, development consultants, former bureaucrats, and military personnel occupying high-level positions for brokering development policies. In a recent paper, Kamruzzaman (2017) coined the term NDEs where he defines NDEs as people whose main income is derived from working as self-employed consultants or being employed by the government, non-government, or external agencies precisely to formulate, implement, and assess public development policies, programmes, and projects in their countries of residence (Kamruzzaman, 2017). Broadly speaking, development experts who are tagged with international funding schemes generally enjoy a great deal of legitimacy among national policy elites and donors. This can also be said for Western academics who are often commissioned as the principal investigators for convening development-related research in developing countries. Such a trend is largely consistent with the idea of international development, which can be seen as a process mostly dominated and guided by western development professionals. When development programmes or studies need to be convened in developing countries, local professionals/aid workers – NDEs - are being included and incorporated within this process. There could be various reasons (e.g., giving the project/study a local face to ease/convenience for project operation, gaining access to key stakeholders/policymakers) to include the NDEs in international development programmes and studies. In a nutshell, the NDEs generally act as mediators between western development experts and local development organisations or

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Rohingyas, a big burden for Bangladesh: PM’ Retrieved from <https://www.thedailystar.net/rohingya-crisis/rohingya-refugees-big-burden-bangladesh-1802272> accessed on 18 Oct. 2021

stakeholders. In most cases, the national development experts' role is guided and often dictated by the donor's interest and facilitated by the western development experts.

In this context, this study explores whether there is a difference among the experts based on their nationality and/or ethnicity in performing their professional responsibilities. In doing so, this study reveals the nature of any existing differences among the international and national development experts. We also investigated setting up agendas or priorities within an organisation, the decision-making process, fund flow, liaison between different donors, interaction, and the nature of engagement between NDEs and international development experts (IDEs). More specifically, whether the donors drive the issue (Shutt (2006) insisting that money matters in aid relationships) or the NDEs (who are supposed to be upholding the interest of their country of origin) can be the architect of devising such policies that will resolve the issue with strong ownership of Bangladesh and its diverse stakeholders (including the government and host community for example). This research aims to make empirical and conceptual contributions that will have wider relevance in understanding the role of 'national development experts' within the domain of international development.

## **Background**

The Rohingya in Bangladesh, a Muslim ethnic minority group from Myanmar's Rakhine state, fled violence and persecution, resulting in a historic migration crisis (UN, 2019). Throughout history, the Rohingya resided mainly in the Mayu peninsula in northern Arakan (present Rakhine state), near the present-day border with Bangladesh. The Rohingya population has a thousand-year history in Myanmar, which can be traced back to the ninth century. Prolonged conflicts between the Burmese (Myanmar was previously known as Burma) and the Arakan people and the eventual victory of the Burmese people triggered the mass displacement of Arakan Muslims to Bangladesh's Chittagong region (Ullah, 2011; Ibrahim, 2018).

The first wave of displaced Rohingya people came to Bangladesh in 1977-1978. About 300,000 Rohingya fled at the time (Farzana, 2015; Haque, 2017). In 1982, a new citizenship law further suppressed the rights of the Rohingya population within Myanmar since the Rohingya allegedly failed to provide evidence to fulfil the amended citizenship criteria (Mohajon, 2018). In 1991-1992, the second wave of displacement forced 270,000 Rohingya to escape (Grundy-Warr & Wong, 1997). The latest influx of the Rohingya took place on 25 August 2017, when over 742,000 Rohingya fled from Myanmar, seeking (UNHCR, 2019).

The influx of the Rohingya in 2017 in Bangladesh constitutes a security, peace, and conflict challenge for Bangladesh, adding to existing development challenges. The primary development challenges for Bangladesh include poverty, inequality, and dismal educational performance (World Bank, 2019; World Bank, 2018a). Among these, extreme poverty constitutes one of the leading challenges, with 22 million people living below the extreme poverty line (World Bank, 2018b) and 70 million people living below the extreme poverty line (World Data Lab, 2019). Other key development challenges for Bangladesh include climate change and environmental risks, public health, gender discrimination, and security risks arising from terrorism-related activities (World Bank, 2018a; UNHCR, 2019). These challenges have been further aggravated by nearly one million Rohingya refugees (741,577 since August 2017) living in makeshift camps in Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2019).



According to the World Bank (2018a), the massive influx of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh will lead to a growing economic concern for Bangladesh. It has already created an economic burden for Bangladesh to continue supporting the displaced Rohingya as the support from the international communities is on the decline<sup>2</sup>. The increasing number of HIV aids and chickenpox patients in the Rohingya camps makes the host community more vulnerable to existing health problems as well (Hossain et al., 2018; Government of UK, 2019). The influx of the Rohingya refugees is also causing a huge environmental impact that includes impact on the environment such as surface and groundwater pollution and the destruction of ecology where the Rohingya camps are popped up (UNDP and UN Women, 2018).

Bangladesh has made significant progress in many areas, including poverty reduction, gender discrimination, health, and education, graduating to a Middle-Income Country (MIC). However, this hardly means that Bangladesh has managed to eradicate different types of poverty entirely. Besides, global poverty has shifted towards MICs, sometimes referred to as the 'new geography of global poverty' (Evans, 2010). In a similar context, Sumner (2012) mentions that nowadays most of the world's poorest people now live in MICs. This pushed many development experts to work on this broader development field in Bangladesh since its independence in 1971.

As such, there have been numerous development interventions in Bangladesh undertaken by both the government and NGOs. At the same time, there has been a body of work critiquing the politics of developmental aid (often labelled as 'aid ethnography' or 'aidnography'), examining international experts' status and role in global development. Existing aid ethnographies highlight international experts' roles as specialist experts, sources of local evidence, and agenda setters (Grindle and Thomas, 1989), as gatekeepers and intermediaries between aid donors and recipients (Long, 2001; Latour, 1996), and as interpreters and brokers of different development narratives (Bierschenk et al., 2002, 2000; Olivier de Sardan, 2005; Lewis and Mosse, 2006). Under such a context, the roles of national development experts or consultants were entirely ignored (Kamruzzaman, 2017). Thus, the findings of this study on the NDEs will contribute to understanding an important but neglected set of actors in effective policy-making in Bangladesh. Given the lack of empirical material on NDEs, the findings of this study build on the growing 'aidnography' literature taking the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh as a case study. It is also hoped that the findings will help manage the refugee crisis of the present time, identifying the best practices and gaps of development experts.

## **The Objective of the Research**

The main objective of the study was to explore whether National Development Experts (NDEs) can effectively shape and influence a development policy agenda about the Rohingya crisis or are they reliant on or dictated by the donors' priorities. This was achieved through reflective accounts of purposively selected NDEs (working on the Rohingya crisis at various capacities) where rich details of their experiences were used to understand the complex relationships of aid (Eyben, 2006), focusing on their experience of working on the Rohingya crisis. This study also obtained views from some foreign/international development experts and compared and

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<sup>2</sup> 'Funding on decline, challenges up' retrieved on 25 August 2021 from <https://www.thedailystar.net/rohingya-crisis/news/funding-decline-challenges-2160016>

contrasted their accounts with the NDEs' narratives to obtain a fuller picture. The study had three specific sub-objectives:

- To assess the experiences of the NDEs in shaping and influencing Bangladesh's policy agenda on the Rohingya crisis;
- To explore whether there are differences with NDEs working 'on site' (Cox's Bazar) in the experience of the NDEs based in metropolis [Dhaka] (focusing on NGOs working on Rohingya issues and NDEs working for/with them);
- To understand the nature of engagement of international development experts in Rohingya issues in Bangladesh and view the roles and agencies of Bangladeshi NDEs;

## Research Methodology

Empirical evidence was collected from national and international development experts (including academics from different universities and policy experts working on Rohingya issues) from Bangladesh and beyond. We adopted a qualitative approach (Key Informants Interviews - KII) to understand the complex interaction, negotiation, and nature of NDEs and IDEs in Bangladesh. A total of 25 qualitative interviews (among them, 5 were conducted with the international experts) were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. We purposively selected participants with demonstrated experience of working on the Rohingya issues. Narrative reflections about their experience and engagement were the main focus during the interviews. We convened these interviews in two locations, Dhaka and Cox's Bazar. However, since it was not safe to convene face to face interviews due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the interviews were conducted using online platforms (such as Google Meet, Zoom, and Skype) and over the telephone. Informed consent was obtained before convening the interviews. Cognate ethical issues are managed professionally. For example, interviews were recorded with informed consent and then the transcriptions were anonymised. Transcriptions were carried out for qualitative content analysis based on the emerging themes generated from the transcripts. We used generic occupational status (e.g., academic, consultant, policy experts, etc.) to represent the participants' views instead of the participants' actual names. Even for some aspects, given the sensitivity of data, we used our discretion to keep participants' identity anonymous.

## Study Location

As the main study focus of the research was the National Development Experts working on the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh, the study was conducted in two locations in Bangladesh. The following two districts were selected for collecting qualitative data:

- a. **Dhaka** (the metropolis/centre): Dhaka represents a city with the presence of a higher number of development organisations. Most such development organisations have already established their headquarters in Dhaka. Furthermore, international development experts are mostly available in Dhaka.
- b. **Cox's Bazar**: Since the Rohingya refugee crisis was used as a case study for this research project in Bangladesh, we aimed to explore the nature of engagement of NDEs and IDEs collecting field-level data from Cox's Bazar who were directly dealing with the Rohingya crisis at the field level.

Apart from these two physical locations, development experts from overseas were interviewed using the online platform.

## **Findings**

This section elaborates on the main findings of the research. They are structured below under four broad themes. The first section discusses the roles of national development experts in the Rohingya crisis. The second section offers the NGOs-based experts' experiences and their role in the Rohingya crisis. Views from both sets of experts are combined in the third section. We also offer a comparative discussion between the roles of national and international development experts. The fourth section engages the debate over the gender dimension and contribution of the experts working in the Rohingya crisis. From the overall discussion of the findings, evidence suggests that experts can hardly have a valuable contribution to the policy formation dialogues and process with regards to the Rohingya crisis. Due to its complex nature, the GoB prioritised negotiation and thus continued with its diplomatic channel to resolve the Rohingya crisis. Besides, the recommendation came from the findings that all stakeholders, including national, international, and local stakeholders, must bring into the dialogue a comprehensive policy on the Rohingya crisis for effective management of the Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh.

### **National Development Experts and the Rohingya Crisis**

In understanding the perception from the national experts, most of the participants in this study mentioned that the Rohingya crisis and other development challenges are not the same. The Rohingya crisis is not primarily a development challenge; instead, it was an outcome of a long-term genocide committed by the government of Myanmar. It created further challenges in dealing with the crisis as this has turned into one of the biggest humanitarian crises in the modern day. Subsequently, hosting around one million Rohingya in nearby host communities created a massive challenge for Bangladesh. Therefore, contributing to the positive changes by various stakeholders in this matter was perceived to be very low. Most of the participants stated that the broader solutions to the problem have to be found with the active engagement of Myanmar, which is a political and diplomatic matter, and the issue cannot be resolved from a development perspective. In other words, their activities are focused more on short-term support for the Rohingya on various issues such as survival and maintaining day-to-day needs, primary health, education, skills, and capacity building.

The Rohingya crisis evolved from the historical perspective of treating the Rohingya as foreigners in Myanmar. It was evident from the views of the NDEs that Bangladesh does not seem to have a great deal of understanding of the Rohingya in Myanmar. Therefore, a strong opinion came from some of the national experts that insufficient information about Myanmar has been a challenge to understanding the entire crisis, at least when the latest episode of the crisis unfolded in 2017. An apparent lack of detailed information and knowledge about the Rohingya crisis was also deemed to be an issue for the wider international community. As an experienced national expert who has been working on the Rohingya crisis for decades mentioned

We never tried to understand the overall situation of the Rohingya in Myanmar. When I first went to Myanmar, I witnessed that all ethnic groups in Myanmar are against the Rohingya. Even the father of Aung San Suu Kyi had a very negative image of the Rohingya [...]. We needed to understand this perspective to understand the Rohingya crisis (a professor of public administration).

Thus, Bangladesh seems to lack a holistic understanding of the depth and breadth of the crisis. While the computed nature was known to some in academia, the same cannot be said for the policymakers and the majority of national think-tanks who did not foresee the problem and have a research team working on Rohingya/Myanmar. According to this respondent, such limitation of misreading the Rohingya crisis is causing a problem towards the policymaking for the Rohingya.

In delineating the policy challenges for this crisis, most participants referred to the fact that there is no centralised policy on the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh. So, there is a dire need for a comprehensive policy framework on the Rohingya now living in Bangladesh. The lack of a specific policy puts Bangladesh in a difficult situation dealing with the Rohingya in Bangladesh. Some participants raised questions about the strategies if the Rohingya commit crimes; what would be their future related to education for their children? Dealing with the Rohingya on an ad hoc basis would create complexity for the GoB. As a participant mentioned:

I heard that many Rohingya are marrying Bengali, so how would we deal with the children? What would be the citizenship status of these children is a big question? If Rohingya are engaged in any criminal activities, what would be the legal procedures of dealing with them? We do not have a policy on dealing with such issues in Bangladesh at this moment [...]. We will have to think from a long-term perspective forming a centralised policy (A journalist and development researcher).

It also emerged that contributing to a Rohingya related policy is not an easy task; instead, it has many complicated elements. For example, one expert mentioned that both policymakers and experts have problems such as hesitations and frustrations communicating their research to policymakers. Besides, researchers do not want to contribute to the policy-making process. They mostly wish to increase their research expertise on the Rohingya refugees as it has demand in international studies and/or development projects. Alternatively, most policymakers are not receptive to the recommendations and suggestions derived from evidence-based research. It was also found from the discussions of various participants that policymakers hardly pay heed to recommendations from researchers and academics.

In many cases, such research work remains unheard of and often unappreciated by policymakers. This was perceived to be a key limitation of the policy-making process regarding the Rohingya crisis. As one retired professor and a renowned development professional with decades of research experience on the Rohingya mentioned:

If we come to the recipient point of policy-making, where should we go? The governmental machinery, which has the tasks to look after this type of people, is entirely driven by security considerations. If they considered it a humanitarian issue, many decisions [on the Rohingya crisis] would have been different [...] The main actor is the state. The state is not conducive to receiving or engaging you to secure your input to provide space for your thoughts. The system has become oblivious, States which are ruled through coercive apparatus. Here we see the head of police and the head of the

army play a significant role. The judiciary process has become an extended arm of the state. How would you expect a rational decision-making process from such a system? Where the parliament would be the forum to develop the law, public representatives will reflect your views. Civil society would articulate a diverse range of ideas, but everything is absent now. If I go beyond that, I will be raft up, or at least there is such a perception. If I do that, I will miss out on many benefits, and there is a lot to lose from the process apart from the financial benefits. (A retired professor of international relations and development professional)

However, some participants also said that researchers, academics, and other development professionals had made some contributions despite the above constraints. First, this was felt that research work, publications, and different outputs help create public opinion on national and global platforms. As an expert said at the beginning of the Rohingya crisis, before the influx of 2017, the key approach was to highlight the crisis at the international and national levels as not many people were aware of the crisis. Other experts expressed a similar view. However, the situation changed massively after the Rohingya influx in 2017 due to the horrific and brutal torture and oppression experienced. Although the nature of the crisis brought the issue to the global stage, there remains a need to raise a voice regularly as Myanmar does not feel obliged to resolve the problem. As many experts expressed, there also remains a need to define the Rohingya atrocities as a form of genocide. Under such a situation, the entire world started to receive Rohingya related research and publications, which can also be seen as an impact. In this context, an associate professor of anthropology with over five years of experience researching the Rohingya mentioned:

Sharing and disseminating research work findings in various national and international conferences can help reach the policymakers as many policymakers and representatives of the government also attend such occasions. It may not have a considerable impact on policy-making, but such small contributions may impact the long run. (An associate professor in Anthropology)

However, the government of Bangladesh (GoB) and the policymakers are not getting much support from research because much of the research is not policy-oriented. In other words, most academics and researchers fail or are not interested in bringing the research-informed policy-making on the Rohingya crisis. Thus, researchers have a vast scope to take their work into the policy agenda. As one of the participants with a decade long experience of researching the Rohingya crisis mentioned:

I researched the education of Rohingya children. We noticed that there are restrictions for providing the services of education to the children. There is a scope to take it to the advocacy level of the GoB. However, there remains a challenge whether we can achieve it or not. Other people like me feel such limitations because we do not have the environment to influence policy-making with our research-informed work. (An assistant professor in sociology)

It is evident that national development experts can have important contributions to the crisis despite various limitations. However, some also raised the issue of having access to the policymakers. In many cases, close relationships and access to the government's policymakers (mainly the representatives of the GoB) deem to play a positive/influential role. As a

respondent mentioned, not all NDEs have access to policymakers. As a founder of a research organisation that focuses on the Rohingya crisis further mentioned:

We have good access to the then Foreign Secretary, who told us to produce an evidence-based publication highlighting the Rohingya community's atrocities in Rakhine State in Myanmar. We took this as a challenge, as we did not know whether he would like it or not. In the end, we managed to fulfil the need. It would have been difficult for others to contribute as we had good access. (founder of a research organisation)

In contrast to this view, another participant with a decade's worth of experience researching the Rohingya crisis mentioned, getting access to the policy level is a big issue for researchers. She continued:

It is relatively hard for us to get access to the policy-making process. That is the reality. The researchers are aware of it, but sometimes, many donors do not understand it. They are more interested in completing a project within their deadline, whether it contributes to policy-making. (An assistant professor in sociology)

It was also reflected in the research findings that independent and freelance development consultants have less opportunity to contribute to policy-making as they need to follow the terms of reference (ToR) defined by their employing organisations. They mainly start their work keeping and agreeing to the ToR, and they cannot go beyond their ToR even if they want to. In such cases, a hasty approach can also be seen to complete the agreed work within a specific time frame that is often very short. As one freelance development expert mentioned:

Freelance development consultants have limitations to reach the policy-making process due to the nature of their contract with a particular agency. In most cases, they work with agency-led evaluation projects that do not have any policy implication at all [...]. Besides, I also doubt the extent to which policy-making is evidence as the policymakers always formulate policy to serve the interest of a particular interest group. (A freelance researcher)

This gets further complicated when some academics, researchers, and experts tend not to conduct evidence-based policy formation; instead, they focus and follow the narratives of the donors. Such an approach is particularly effective in getting contracts from donors in many areas, for example, understanding violent extremism among the Rohingya, gender inequality, health crises, environmental issues, the tension between the host and Rohingya communities, and others. Despite such limitations and the uneasy relationship between the policymakers and the NDEs, it is opined that the researchers and academics should actively consider and explore innovative ways to explore how their research can make positive contributions to cognate policies. In doing so, this was suggested that there might be some further obstacles as the GoB may have some reliability and trust issues in civil society and other non-governmental actors. Therefore, experts from the government or affiliated governmental organisations, including universities and think-tanks, have a higher opportunity to contribute to the Rohingya crisis. In this context, a professor of (discipline) in a leading public university with decades of experience of researching the Rohingya and a founder of a think-tank mentioned:

Since they [policy makers] know that I am objective and not interested in politics as parties and politics do not interest me. At the same time, I know politics very well, as I have some personal experience with identity. If I were from a private university, then from a public university [the name was omitted here], probably they would hesitate to

engage me. Furthermore, even if they were from a public university, my identity was not trustworthy; presumably, they would also be hesitant. We are now working with the different ministries of the GoB, and they are taking our research findings very seriously. (A Professor of international relations and founder of a national thinktank)

Besides, individual identity (e.g., an academic's ability and influence in the public arena) might play a crucial role in policy apparatus deciding if they are willing to approach him/her to make policy on a given issue. In contrast, it was noticed that leading civil society organisations are not raising their voices while addressing the Rohingya crisis as they generally do when it comes to other national crises and problems, an issue raised by one of the respondents. A retired professor and a development professional with decades of experience in Rohingya research mentioned:

They [experts and civil society members] do not want to contribute to the policy-making process. They do not look at this humanitarian crisis passionately. Secondly, they feel that even if they think that they need to raise their voice to ensure the human rights issues of the Rohingya, they remain absolutely silent due to their interest or gain from this crisis as simple as that. It is not about their lack of interest, but mainly because they want to achieve something out of that. Some echo the same jargon that the state is promoting, for example, securitising the Rohingya crisis. These experts do not want to go against [...] state's standpoint and do not wish to create an uneasy relationship with the state. (A retired professor of international relations and development professional)

Finally, it was also opined by many participants that the Rohingya crisis has created opportunities for many researchers and academics in two broad areas. One is that this has created financial opportunities, and the other is international publications. It has brought widespread attention for many researchers and academics, particularly after the massive Rohingya influx in Bangladesh in 2017. As mentioned earlier, the Rohingya crisis is different from traditional development crises; therefore, we will have to deal with it as such. While most of the development interventions and research projects largely focus on the well-being and the basic needs of the Rohingya refugees, the development experts (both national and international) can contribute to the broader policy challenges.

Many participants of this research opined that the GoB misread the entire crisis from the beginning of the 2017 Rohingya influx, which was reflected in their strategies of dealing with and managing the Rohingya population (see above). It was thus suggested that, in many cases, the GoB looked shaky in dealing with the Rohingya, as one of the participants mentioned. This retired professor also referred to the fact that the GoB should have a clear idea about what it is doing and how it will deal with the sustainable resolutions of the Rohingya crisis. One example of such a misreading of the crisis was seeing and managing the crisis from a disaster management perspective rather than recognising it as a consequence of atrocities and political violence. The second point was not to recognise the Rohingya as refugees.

GoB already recognised many Rohingya before 2017 as refugees; why are they not doing it now? What are the justifications for such strategies? (A retired professor of international relations and development professional)

The statement clearly shows that either policymakers are not learning from the previous episodes of the Rohingya influx in Bangladesh or are ignoring earlier roles in dealing with the Rohingya crisis as the Rohingya who entered in 2017 in Bangladesh are not recognised as

refugees. Finally, it can be argued that evidence-based knowledge creation is necessary to take the crisis to the international level through research, as another participant mentioned. Creating a national and centralised repository on the Rohingya crisis, creating a platform for all stakeholders working in the area and a database for the Rohingya population was also reflected during participants' discussion.

### Experiences of the NGO based Experts

Findings from the previous section suggest that contributing to the policy level on the Rohingya crisis is not an easy task. In contrast, accessibility for the researchers and experts to policymaking and the policymakers' often deliberate reluctance to hear the experts' voices generally create major difficulties. Under such circumstances, the local experts and civil society organisations (often known as NGOs in Bangladesh) hardly contribute to national-level policymaking. There has been a marked difference in viewing the local organisation's considerable policy impacts based in Cox's Bazar by the regional development representatives and experts. In such a case, a top-level NGO professional from a local NGO who is mainly based in Cox's Bazar mentioned:

We cannot take our opinion on the policy level as we work at the local level with the community people. However, we try to express our views in different meetings and seminars with influential people. We also make our points in dialogues, workshops and even in a press conference [...] We have formed an alliance at Cox's Bazar named Cox's Bazar CSO-NGO Forum (CCNF<sup>3</sup>) in collaboration with NGOs working on the Rohingya crisis. We have already conducted 12-13 workshops and seminars. CCNF organised a national level press conference to take our voice among the policymakers. But we are doubtful to what extent could we reach? Policymakers from the top should come forward to hear from us for a better policy formulation (An executive director of a NGO based on Cox's Bazar extensively working on the Rohingya crisis).

This particular expert represents an NGO that mainly works in Cox's Bazar, and they do not have a Dhaka office. There is a tendency among many locally grown NGOs with national-level exposure to establish at least a liaison office in the capital city. However, there are very few NGOs like this. In contrast to this, UN agencies who work closely with the GoB have relatively higher chances of contributing to policy formation, as evidence suggests. A UN-based national expert who is working on the Rohingya response mentioned that

My organisation is closely working with the GoB and stays connected with their policy agenda. We have higher chances to influence the policy agenda for these reasons. Besides, we need to get evidence from the field to contribute to policy formation. If we do not see the need and requirements of the beneficiaries very closely, it would be challenging to implement a policy agenda. (A mid-level development professional working with a UN agency)

From a similar perspective, another development expert from an international NGO pointed out that UN agencies and the big INGOs generally influence and significantly contribute to policy agendas. Smaller NGOs do not have much to contribute to the policy agenda; instead, they implement service deliveries for the Rohingya. As he mentioned

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<sup>3</sup> See more about the alliance <http://www.cxb-cso-ngo.org/origin/> last accessed on 27 Jan 2021



Generally, policymakers prioritise the suggestions from the UN agencies. Besides, some of the big INGOs who are managing the camps can influence the process. Since I am from a relatively smaller international NGO, it is hard for us to contribute to the policy agenda. We can only raise our voices in different forums, but we do not see the output if our voices are included or not. (A mid-level development professional working in an international NGO)

Strong dependency on the donor fund repeatedly came into the discussions of this study. A top-level NGO professional from a local NGO talked about their heavy dependence on the donor fund, which sometimes acts as the main barrier to raising their voice. Donor driven approach sometimes can be a problem where many organisations feel that they could not work targeting the policymakers as they need to follow the donor conditions and recipe, as one respondent elaborated:

It is challenging for a local NGO to contribute nationally if they do not have a national-level network. We are based at Cox's Bazar, and if we need to come to Dhaka [capital city], we need to think about the expenses at Dhaka. If we want to organise a program in Dhaka, that would be expensive for us. How could we manage such costs? We do not have the financial stability to follow such an approach. We are entirely dependent on donor funds, and we mainly work on the availability of funds on a project basis. If we do not have funds, we will not be able to continue with our activities at the community level. (An executive director of an NGO based in Cox's Bazar)

It was also noted that these local development experts never want to bargain or initiate a meaningful negotiation with the donor. Instead, they agree with everything suggested by influential donors, including UN agencies and other international development organisations. Apart from this, local-level experts have an idea that they can talk about their thoughts to a forum where district-level stakeholders, including the District Commissioner, Chief of RRRC at Cox's Bazar, and focal representatives of the UN at Cox's Bazar and other big NGOs. A participant suggested that if that means contributing to policymaking, they can share their thoughts. However, it is tough to influence the policy from the divisional level. Besides, they also need to deal with the district-level bureaucracy while working with the Rohingya crisis. They are particularly obliged to maintain the strict rules about mobility within and out of the Rohingya refugee camps.

While talking about fund and donor relations, some participants mentioned ensuring local level accountability. Accountability of expenditures and fund disbursement by donors is a big question. Founder of a research organisation based in Dhaka who is also a journalist with extensive experience in researching the Rohingya, mentioned in this context:

I raised a question to an international development expert that if you spend 100 BDT, how much do you spend on the Rohingya and for yourself? But she did not explain it to me, saying that she did not have the breakdown. I do not buy it [...] I do not mind if they need to spend more on managing staff as they work in a crisis area, but there should be transparency. (founder of a research organisation)

This section raised some of the critical aspects associated with NGOs working in the Rohingya crisis. Since all NGOs are highly dependent on donor funding, in most cases, they cannot go beyond the scopes and restricted guidelines of the donor. Only big NGOs could reach the policy level to some extent. However, it is hard to understand their level of contribution to the policy

on the Rohingya. The NGO-based experts highlighted that they mostly remain occupied with different types of service delivery in the camps to improve the Rohingya's lifestyles. The key limitation that they face is the heavy reliance on the project-based approach.

### **The Roles of the International Development Expert on the Rohingya Crisis**

It was discussed earlier that the Rohingya crisis has already attracted global attention in many ways. This has resulted in many UN agencies and international organisations introducing different development schemes, opening up many 'international experts' (for this research, 'international experts' are development professionals coming from outside of Bangladesh) to be involved and work in these projects. The research findings show a growing tendency among many young overseas scholars to start/convene their doctoral research on the Rohingya crisis. Besides, many academics with a track record of studying humanitarian crises also developed an interest in working on the Rohingya issues to create a more considerable academic contribution. However, it is tough to measure their contribution towards policy implementation on the Rohingya crisis. Evidence suggests that the general interest of the International Development Experts (IDEs) on the Rohingya crisis is to advance their academic career rather than contributing to the policy formulation in the Bangladeshi context. However, there was also a strong opinion claiming that the work on the Rohingya issue helped create a global awareness on the Rohingya crisis, although such work may not directly impact the policy-making process. Besides, both national and international experts agreed that international experts have relatively less access to the policy-making process in the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh.

Despite relatively less contribution to Bangladesh's policy level, a strong bias towards international/foreign staff and experts in many international organisations working in the Rohingya crisis was also evident among many national experts while interviewing them. In this context, a national expert working in a global organisation claimed that remuneration could be a motivation for a foreign expert because the salary is relatively higher for an international expert than any national development expert. A few national and international development experts also raised safety and security issues as working among the Rohingya does not involve any life-threatening situation, as seen among many protracted and conflict-prone areas. The situation among the Rohingya in Bangladesh is relatively peaceful compared to some other war-affected countries. Thus, it was obvious that international development experts were interested in the Rohingya issue since it was their area of work, as highlighted by some national experts.

Besides, a tendency among the many Bangladeshi staff was also found where they prefer to have an international team as their immediate boss or reporting person instead of a Bangladeshi professional despite a national professional's expertise and experience. A humanitarian activist working in a global organisation who later started working as a freelancer mentioned that

When I joined as a project leader to work in the Rohingya crisis, one of his subordinate staff wrote to the global office bypassing the country director reporting that they want to have a foreign staff as a project leader instead of a Bangladeshi professional [she wrote that they do not wish to a Bangladesh to lead the project]. He found out the issue later on [...] I realised that the international staff run the office with higher flexibility

and Bangladesh staff tend to enjoy it better, which I did not continue. (A journalist and freelance development activist)

Another development expert identified such a tendency as a critical problem as he mentioned that "it is our problem that happens due to the lack of confidence on the issue. We take the words of the 'Whiteman' as the words of the Bible (*bedbakko*). We need to get rid of such an attitude". In contrast to this view, it was also found that sometimes, international staff fail to deliver what they are expected to do and lack expertise significantly. An American expert with Bangladeshi origin working in the mental health area on the Rohingya crisis mentioned

But you know, the funny thing or ironic issue is that sometimes the experts they could bring in do not have much expertise to offer. For example, the mental health department in one leading international organisation [the name of the organisation was not used] does not have a professional with a mental health background at all [...] That is how money goes and that sort of expertise that they bring [...] The need for international mental health experts is there. But what is being provided is not matching with the need. You can find that across the UN and other organisations. There is so much waste and misallocation of resources. Besides, people get hired based on their relationships. (A mental health professional from the USA)

In contrast to this view, it was also found that sometimes, national experts do not get priority even with proven expertise. As another national expert with a decade long experience of researching the Rohingya mentioned:

If I do better than an international expert, I will get less priority. International experts always get relatively higher/ better preferences within the organisation and team. Sometimes, the organisation fails to realise that local or national experts have more in-depth knowledge of the crisis than international experts. It becomes a secondary aspect often. (An assistant professor in sociology)

While talking on the local context and knowledge, all international experts agreed that international experts significantly lack in this area, where they see the relevance of national experts. However, national experts should have specific skill sets to be an expert on the Rohingya crisis. As a senior professor with experience of working on the Rohingya crisis from the University of Australia mentioned

People who provide the local knowledge do need to have a certain skill set. It is not just anyone from the local community who can be a local expert. Those skill sets allow them to work with people who might have a broad range of experiences, referring to what they know about the context of the local situation. (A professor of Environment, Australia)

He also raised the difficulties of being an outsider in the context of Rohingya research. He mentioned that 'being an outsider is very difficult. We spent some time in the surrounding area. It gave us valuable insights into the socio-cultural perspectives of the Rohingya in camps.' Under such a context, national development experts can have an added benefit. A national expert mentioned that it is not easy to grasp the whole situation better than a local expert. So, translation plays a vital role here. Though local experts' viewpoints are not as keen as a foreigner's, it is difficult to ignore a local expert because they understand the context better than any international expert. It is expensive, as most of the international staff receive payment

three to four times higher than national experts. In such a context, a local expert based in a local NGO at Cox's Bazar said:

We may consider the international professional as a technical expert only, but it cannot substitute the national experts, as we now have plenty of national experts in the area. In prioritising the national experts, we would be able to reduce the expenses of a project and activity [...] Since the national experts can better understand the national and local perspectives than an international expert, it will increase the effectiveness of the tasks. Besides, local resources will also be enriched gradually. International experts should be consulted to increase the expertise of the national experts, but not to substitute the national experts. (An executive director of a NGO based in Cox's Bazar)

In a similar discussion, an international expert stated that many national experts are doing very well in the Rohingya research as they have good academic training with local knowledge. However, the professor of the environment from Australia emphasised that the definition of experts has to be based on their expertise, not based on their country of origin. It is about the range of experience that makes someone an expert in the respective field. The country of origin of the identity of the West has nothing to do with it in the present world. He talked about his student, who is now contributing with his scholarly writing. He has local origin but can be termed and defined as an expert. As he mentioned:

It is not the origin of the person, and If you look at the international experts, you can have Bangladeshi origin' international experts' if someone has a broad range of experience beyond their country of origin. If someone comes from the USA without any experience, he or she will not be an international expert; that may be an international person. My view of international experts is someone who has a broad range of experiences on a wide range of cultures, environmental conditions, and social conditions. And further to that, if they are going to be effective if they could put aside their cultural biases and look at the problem through the lens of the local people. A lot of people from developed countries have the opportunity to have that broad range of experiences. (A professor of Environment, Australia)

The last part of his discussion is important where he asserted that Western countries have the opportunities to train people to gain a broad range of experience that implicitly refers to the lacking or inability of the developing countries to provide the same for their national experts. While discussing international experts' expenses, it was found that there is a major payment difference between National and International development experts. It was found that a national expert gets one-third of what an international expert gets working in the same position. Although there is no visible conflict between National and International Experts, it surely creates an invisible tension between them, making the national development experts feel 'inferior'. This certainly highlights one of the existing inequalities between the international and national development experts. Despite their professional expertise and pros and cons, they are doing the same work and for the same purpose. But their pay gap is enormous.

The language barrier was also found to be an important criterion that creates a difference between national and international development experts. Some experts asserted that international experts have less understanding about the Rohingya. They are keener on collecting funds, issuing a budget, and completing the task rather than actually solving anything. NDEs also contribute more or less using some of their advantages such as

geographical identity, language, communication, etc. They are also good at fieldwork at the camp level.

Often national experts cannot reach the policy level. For international experts, it is relatively easier than national experts to reach policymaking. However, most of the national and international experts think that national experts are better positioned to contribute at the policy level. Another expert said that IDEs are good at team management. Despite not knowing the full context of an unknown region or people, they seem to adapt quite well. At the same time, NDEs are naturally good at the local context since the issue is occurring in their territory. So, in the case of policymaking, NDEs, in theory, have a better likelihood to make a positive contribution than IDEs. Very few participants mentioned that international experts are doing a better job in terms of policymaking.

An international expert, professor of gender and women studies at a US university, positively highlighted the long-standing tradition of various Bangladeshi NGOs managing marginalised populations and ensuring rights at the local level. He frequently referred to the work of humanitarian actors like BRAC. Although the Rohingya crisis is different from other development areas, such experience was phenomenal in managing the massive displaced Rohingya community at the local level. While comparing the contribution of national and international development experts, the same participants mentioned that some experienced and passionate IDEs could work independently with better resource mobilisation. He noted that 'I can bring more resources and grants from various sources. More resources can be mobilised; most western researchers do not have such resources.' He also discussed what international experts would personally gain from working on the Rohingya refugee crisis. He continued:

Researchers have a more personal agenda than political agendas—usually, their agenda is to complete the dissertation or get a tenure track. The political agenda is controlled and guided by their funding body, donor agenda, or donor-driven agenda. For many young professionals or experts, donor's guidelines and instructions are seen as Bible or order, and they do not realise that they can negotiate or push it. (A Professor of Gender and Women Studies, USA)

Under such circumstances, the donor-driven approach was also identified as a significant problem by IDEs and NDEs working in the area. An executive director of a local NGO shared his views in the previous section, where he detailed the challenges of a donor-driven approach to the Rohingya crisis.

Let us look at the discussion on the policy contribution by the international expert on the Rohingya crisis. Evidence suggests that it is generally harder for international experts than national experts. However, an international expert from a global think-tank researching the Rohingya crisis reported that international experts are better positioned to contribute to the broader perspective of the Rohingya crisis due to their strong advocacy power and efforts. As she continued

I think international experts can contribute more than national experts. They are in a better position due to their advocacy strengths. Since they are working in the global context, they could reach the wider world community and receive much bigger funding and grants than the national experts. Besides, national experts often face difficulties at the national level from the GoB, which the international experts barely face. (A researcher from a leading think tank in India)

In contrast, the professor of environmental studies added that, often, international experts come with experiences of from different countries and thereby different contexts and implementing such strategies in the Rohingya context may not be the right approach. Instead, there remains a need for a coordinated approach. Another international expert emphasised bringing all experts up to the same level for a pro-Rohingya policy formation. She elaborated:

I think national and international experts must work hand in hand on this. They could bring different perspectives, and it is important to have those multiple perspectives and priorities. (A mental health professional from the USA)

This section discusses the varying perspectives from international and national experts on the Rohingya crisis. The findings show that it is hard to conclude the roles of policy formulation by the international development experts on the Rohingya crisis. However, national experts often depend on various international experts as a good number of international experts from academia come up with their own resources and funding. Despite such views, most international experts are hired by various national and international organisations, including the UN.

### **Gender Perspectives of the Expert**

An important element of understanding the role of NDEs in the Rohingya crisis is national experts' gendered differentiation. Many participants suggested that both national and international NGOs encourage hiring female experts as part their staff. An expert defined such a tendency as 'positive discrimination'. However, some participants frequently raised some common difficulties, such as the fear of security and the hardships of travel to the field, which might prove challenging for women, demotivating some national female experts to continue their work on the Rohingya crisis. It is also found that many females are working at the field level. On the subject, a national-level expert said:

We frequently see that many advertisements often encourage females to apply for the position. However, the reality in many cases is different as there is a dominant and practical perception among many recruiters that travelling to the field and handling different types of risks would be difficult for females. Thus, recruits often recruit a male person despite the equal expertise of the female. (An assistant professor in sociology)

While discussing the security issues related to working in a camp, another expert mentioned that she sometimes felt a need for a male researcher while travelling in and out of camps since many people in the camps do not value a female researcher and expert and are as a result not cooperative.

The context is slightly different among the national level experts who tend to work independently. The number of female experts is relatively lower as the findings suggest. A participant stated that lack of international experience and exposure of many females pull them back to be recognised as experts in the area. Besides, the nature of a male dominant society is discussed as the main barrier for females in general. A freelance development researcher explained:

Gender discrimination is a massive issue in a male dominant society. If we look at the global context, the tendency to hold the top position by females is relatively lower. The situation in Bangladesh is even worse than this [...] Considering working in the Rohingya crisis, and I feel that working among the Rohingya is seen as a challenge for

females. There is some resistance in the camp and the local area for females. Security issues are also there for females. Thus, the GoB put some restrictions on the mobility of females in the camp areas. I think we hardly have many female experts who could continue to work on this crisis for a longer term. (A freelance development researcher)

However, from this dominant view, a Bangladeshi Professor in anthropology analysed female involvement from a different perspective. As he stated:

Since the Rohingya is a humanitarian and refugee crisis, it created opportunities for females. Thus, I think female experts are much higher in this area than in other development sectors.

Another academic he pointed out that he included at least one female researcher/expert in all team settings. He continued:

I at least never faced a situation where I did not have a female team member. Although the number of female experts is low, I had a female colleague in my teamwork. I think it is more important to look for the contribution of the female expert to the area than increasing the number of female experts in team research [...] If someone has expertise in the area, we always try to include them in our team from the beginning to contribute. (An Associate Professor on Peace and Conflict Studies)

However, if female researchers or experts in a team are selected merely to fulfil a quota, the broader gender relationship becomes problematic. In such a context, another academic mentioned:

That would be a problem if we only include female researchers to maintain a quota to show that they have a female team member. Instead, if female experts were treated equally, the entire attitude of seeing female experts in a team would have been different. In such a case, they would get relatively higher opportunities to contribute to the policy-making process. I also have observed that female experts are mainly invited or included in some stereotyped areas like sexual and reproductive or maternal health or child nutrition, and so on. Female experts have relatively less participation in policy-making compared to male counterparts. We still see a bias to hear a male voice instead of a female voice in the policy-making forum. (An Associate Professor in Anthropology)

Research findings also show that female experts in a Rohingya-related topic highly depend on the nature of the research or intervention. For example, if a project is based solely on gender issues, surely there will be a higher presence of female experts than male ones. A female national expert mentioned in this context:

I think the number of female experts is higher than male experts. It depends on the level of work and position. I guess female experts are higher in the top and middle level [...] My opinion would be slightly different as I mostly work on gender-related issues [among the Rohingya]. So, I found a higher presence of female workforce and experts in this area [...] However, the working conditions, cultural perspectives and security to work at the field level also influence the number of female experts in the Rohingya crisis. (An assistant professor of sociology)

In her discussion, she also pointed out that sometimes family members do not allow women to work in camps. There is a common perception that safety and security issues are the most common disadvantages for women. Besides, there is a gradual shift in the mindset of many national and international organisations which believe that women can work with equal

effectiveness in camps, and to not discriminate against recruiting females. Simultaneously, talking about security and the presence of traditional gender norms in camps, an expert mentioned an imbalance in the presence of female experts and saw few female Rohingya experts during his work. However, when it came to international experts, the case was different. A good number of international experts, researchers, and academics were found to be women. It was also found from the field data that, while forming a consortium on Rohingya research, the international team highly emphasised the inclusion of female experts from NDEs.

## Discussion

It is well-known that the national development experts (NDEs) play a significant role in formulating development policies for their 'own' countries (Kamruzzaman, 2017; Kumi & Kamruzzaman, 2021), albeit their roles are often unrecognised and invisible. Moreover, the Rohingya crisis presents different types of complexity and challenges as this is not merely a national development challenge for Bangladesh. Instead, the crisis involves multiple international stakeholders. The Rohingya influx in 2017 received international attention from the UN agencies and international development organisations and the attention of the global community in general. Despite the widespread interest, various national, international, and local experts could barely contribute to policy solutions. Besides, the process of influencing government policy on refugee issues received relatively less attention globally (O'Driscoll, 2017). This research adds more to this point by offering the Bangladesh context.

We have found that difficulties in accessing the policymakers and denial/non-responsiveness of the relevant governmental apparatus are the key barriers to policymaking when it comes to the Rohingya crisis. Additionally, most national experts consciously or unconsciously do not pursue research which aims to contribute to policy formation, creating a gap between the experts and policy community. This is reminiscent of the widespread gap between policymakers and researchers for other similar matters (Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010). Furthermore, making evidence-based policy recommendations or influencing policy decisions are rarely on the list of national development experts. This tendency can also have a negative impact on the dialectical relationship between policymakers and development experts. However, the government of Bangladesh may appear to be less willing to formulate a long-term policy for the Rohingya refugee crisis (International Crisis Group, 2019). Such unwillingness for a long-term policy formulation hinders developing a comprehensive and integrated policy on the Rohingya crisis. The abundance of research and/or development projects might result in personal and professional gains as one of the primary motivations to engage in different Rohingya related research and program activities. However, Bogenschneider and Corbett (2010) argue that policymakers would be interested if researchers could deliver output that serves the agenda of the policymakers. It means that the books and journal articles are difficult for policymakers to navigate and sift through in establishing a nexus between research outcomes and their policy agenda. It shows the technical barriers in this milieu while the experts themselves do not feel encouraged/obliged to package their findings in a manner that will be more acceptable to policymakers. Despite such views, bringing various civil society organisations, UNHCR, and other actors to engage in policy formulation actively seemed to be a vital approach (Moreira, 2017), which is almost absent in



Bangladesh. Moreira (2017) further shows that it is even essential to include the refugees' voices for successful policy formulation, a challenge for most refugee policymaking across the world.

The Rohingya crisis created opportunities for many, both at home and abroad, to extend their academic and research expertise. It was also noticed that long-standing connections with their international counterparts also influenced many NDEs to get into Rohingya-related research. Many IDEs extended their collaboration with their funding from different international agencies and platforms. Thus, it undoubtedly created an avenue of opportunity for many NDEs in the recent past, which continues to this day. *The Golden Fleece: Manipulation and Independence in Humanitarian Action*, (Donini, 2012) critically looks at how all humanitarian crises have been instrumentalised by various actors, citing contemporary cases such as Afghanistan, Sudan, and Somalia. The Rohingya crisis shows a tendency where many experts and activists research, publish, and provide humanitarian assistance but fail to go near a sustainable solution through the policy-making process. However, Burnett (2012) argues that the instrumentalization of the humanitarian crisis will probably persist in the future if not abolished.

A tendency to please the IDEs have put NDEs in a position where they lose credibility and fail to become experts in the field. Previous studies show that international experts are seen as specialists, sources of local evidence, and agenda setters (Grindle & Thomas, 1989). Our findings show a reality that is close to that. Besides, national experts largely depend on them since international experts still act as gatekeepers and intermediaries between aid donors and recipients (Long, 2001; Latour, 1996). However, international experts rely on the local knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon; perhaps that is the only motivation for them to include national experts in their projects with very little space to make meaningful contributions to relevant policies emanating from those studies. Often the NDEs compromise in order to be included for financial reasons, which raises questions on their lifelong expertise. Besides, conflict (in many cases, hidden conflict and tension) between international and national staff shows the increasing pattern of stress for many NDEs. Similarly, Koch (2020) suggested that experts from the Global South cannot interpret their realities due to the persistent marginalisation of so-called international experts based on case studies from South Africa and Tanzania. However, local knowledge and expertise were also seen as essential aspects of the Rohingya crisis in the Bangladesh context. Sometimes, the dominant perception of favouring international experts by the host institute is also seen as a problematic approach. The discussion on NDEs' roles showed that it is complicated and unpredictable if the national or international experts significantly contribute to the policymaking of the Rohingya crisis. Evidence suggests that there is no such comprehensive policy on the Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh yet<sup>4</sup>. Under such a context, it is hard to imagine that the local stakeholders would substantially contribute to policymaking. However, local actors should be given priority while considering refugee policies in Bangladesh (O'Driscoll, 2017). In contrast, in most cases, the

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<sup>4</sup> 'Bangladesh to formulate national strategy for Rohingya refugees' retrieved from on 25 January 2021 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/10/01/bangladesh-strategy-rohingya-refugees> and 'Bangladesh's "Rohingya strategy" stokes concern' retrieved from on 25 January 2021 <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2013/11/26/bangladesh-s-rohingya-strategy-stokes-concern> accessed on 25 Jan 2021

local organisation needs to think about their survival due to fund constraints, which in turn force them to be reluctant to think outside donors' terms of references in shaping and formulating any bespoke policy. Such tendencies also suggest their forced inclination towards a project-based approach at local level programme implementation that is mainly a segment of the donor's larger work. Thus, the donor-driven approach seems to be a barrier in reaching the sustainable resolution of the Rohingya crisis. It is also a particular problem that hinders many of the local stakeholders from continuing with long-term goals and activities. Besides, a growing number of independent and freelance consultants in this domain also take this donor's agenda seriously as they do not have much to contribute to the policy-making process. This also shows how the traditional politics of aid impose a local agenda in local contexts instead of a one-size-fits-all recipe (Kamruzzaman, 2014).

While discussing gender perspectives of the NDEs, in many team formations, it was also observed that senior male colleagues include a female expert to ensure that they have a female member in a team; instead of looking at how the female NDE can make a positive contribution. This attitude reveals the traditional male-biased attitude towards females, which is no different than conventional gender differentiation. Besides, female national experts seemed to be marginalised further by fellow male national experts. However, there was a growing tendency of including 'gender experts' in a male-dominated team with a narrow understanding of gender in many cases (Ferguson, 2015). Although the situation in Bangladesh is not the same, in most cases, male experts treat women from a traditional gender perspective. In addition, several assumptions were made regarding security issues and other difficulties women might face in Rohingya camps which were deemed too 'risky'. This is further exacerbated by the traditional patriarchal values of dominant Bangladeshi culture when families or husbands show their 'concerns' for female experts' 'safety' when involved in such cases. Fear of female staff abduction, assault, and rape in the camps are the most frequently used narratives that portray the environment of camps, which subsequently discourage many female experts from working in this domain.

Finally, misreading the crisis and paying less attention to Myanmar's affairs lead to a lack of interest in policymaking and strategic decisions. There is hardly any research-based publication by academics and experts in Bangladesh which can analyse the internal perspectives of the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, an important area that requires serious attention by from academics, researchers, and other policy actors.

### **Limitations of the Study**

COVID-19 had an unprecedented impact on the data collection process of the research. The principal investigator had a research trip to the Rohingya camps in the beginning of January 2020, before the global pandemic, followed by another one during the pandemic. Due to disruptions caused by the pandemic, data collection was significantly delayed. Besides, many of the interviews were collected through online platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, Skype, or more traditionally via telephone. Despite such difficulties, the research team managed to successfully ensure the quality of the data collection and completion of the research project.

## Conclusion

Making a positive and meaningful contribution to the policy-making process is always difficult for researchers. It is particularly challenging for national researchers and scholars working in developing countries. Since the Rohingya crisis presents unique regional geopolitical complexities involving different national and international stakeholders, it is even more challenging for Bangladeshi experts. The challenges are multifaceted with different perspectives: added development challenges for Bangladesh, maintaining all aspects of human rights of the Rohingya and multilateral engagement of Bangladesh in dealing with Rohingya repatriation. However, the complex nature of the crisis has created space for researchers, academics, and activists at home and abroad to extend their work on the Rohingya crisis. A range of research projects is ongoing that look at the crisis from diverse disciplinary backgrounds.

These works can be separated into two broader areas: i) research leading towards various reports and publications in national, regional, and global platforms and ii) studies on humanitarian assistance to improve the livelihood of the Rohingya. As a result, there exists a gap when it comes to contributions to the policy-making process, which mostly follows a unilinear process where the governmental apparatus and stakeholders decide everything. We have identified some existing gaps and challenges and why these studies do not play significant roles in evidence-based policy-making. First, the unwillingness of the policymakers to hear the voices of experts and researchers, where policy-making on the Rohingya crisis is seen as more of a political agenda than a policy issue. Secondly, accessing the policymakers seemed to be the most challenging part for researchers, academics, and activists. Thirdly, an existing research culture where many experts (mainly the national experts) are either not so keen to conduct policy-oriented research or unable to do so. This is primarily because of personal gains to please and praise the existing systems of how research is funded (and they get involved) and policy-making in Bangladesh. Thus, the majority of the stakeholders do not risk their respective interests in changing the status quo.

While discussing such challenges, evidence from our research suggests a nonchalant non-responsive practice limits the role of 'experts' towards finding a dignified solution to the crisis. Moreover, the space for national development experts is further confined than that of international experts. Our findings reveal an existing inequality in current humanitarian development practices and we recommend an inclusive approach that involves both national experts and local actors, with emphasis on locally derived expertise in order to find a durable yet dignified solution to the Rohingya crisis. Moreover, voices from the field have to be taken into account while policy-making on the Rohingya crisis. Thus, adopting a comprehensive national refugee policy is highly important for the well-being of the Rohingya population in Bangladesh and to give the government of Bangladesh greater confidence in effectively managing a vast refugee population, keeping humanitarian priorities in mind.

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