ROHINGYA CRISIS
Governance and community participation

The Rohingya population in Cox's Bazar district lives in different types of settlements. There are collective sites, where the whole population is Rohingya (85% of the population), collective sites with host communities, where refugees live side by side with Bangladeshi residents (13%), and dispersed sites where isolated groups of Rohingya live in villages otherwise populated by Bangladeshis (2%). Governance and community participation structures vary across sites.

The speed at which refugees entered Bangladesh during the 2017 influx prompted a need to organise large numbers of people in a short period of time. To do so efficiently, the majhi system that was in place in makeshift settlements[1] was introduced by the Bangladeshi army in newly constituted settlements. The majhi system uses unelected refugee appointees to support in the estimation of refugee populations, organisation of distributions, and channel communication to the refugee community.

The majhi system raises accountability concerns and majhis have exploited their positions of power in the past. For this reason, humanitarian agencies have set up initiatives to increase community participation through committees and community groups.

In registered refugee camps[2], hosting around 4% of the Rohingya population, the majhi system was abolished in 2007. Here, refugees are organised in Block and Camp Committees with elected representatives. Based on the experience and lessons learned from this governance model, UNHCR has drafted guidelines for establishing similar governance structures adapted to the current context.

In some collective sites with host communities, committees are being piloted which involve both refugees and host communities, the Para Development Committees (PDCs). These have the aim of bringing together refugees and host communities to identify common needs and ease potential tensions. PDCs are selected in community meetings.

At present, various approaches to community participation and governance are being implemented. Humanitarian actors have introduced different initiatives in accord with Bangladeshi authorities. Comprehensive harmonisation efforts are in progress.

About this report

The aim of this report is to map out governance structures and community participation initiatives adopted in different types of settlements. It touches upon the role of the Government of Bangladesh, the majhi system, the Camp Committees, the Para Development Committees in collective sites with host communities, and other community participation initiatives.

This thematic report is based on informal discussions with key stakeholders, complemented by secondary data.

ACAPS welcomes all information that could complement this report. For additional comments or questions please contact Sean Ng at sn@acaps.org

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[1] These are the settlements established by Rohingya refugees who arrived after 1991 and prior to 25 August 2017 (NPM Methodology 03/2018).
[2] These are camps run by UNHCR where Rohingya refugees recognized as such by the Government of Bangladesh are hosted. Prior to this influx, these camps hosted mostly Rohingya who arrived in Bangladesh in the 1990s and were recognised as refugees by the Government of Bangladesh (NPM Methodology 03/2018).

Settlement characteristics

The Rohingya population is hosted across different settlement types. Following the classification by the ISCG and the Site Management sector, these are **collective sites**, **collective sites with host community**, and **dispersed sites**.[3]

Type	Description, as adopted by NPM from Round 9 (NPM Methodology 03/2018)
Collective sites	Camp-like settings with exclusively Rohingya population. This category encompasses registered refugee camps, makeshift settlements, and spontaneous settlements[4] where no Bangladeshi communities live. Officially referred to as camps by the RRRC.
Collective sites with host community	Collective camp-like settlements that developed around existing Bangladeshi communities, presenting a mixed population. Officially referred to as camps by the RRRC.
Dispersed sites	Villages and dispersed locations where Rohingya refugees reside among Bangladeshi host communities

Camp boundaries were drawn by government authorities with the support of Site Management Sector; these are mainly based on topographic/geographical considerations. In the case of registered refugee camps, the camp boundaries were drawn during earlier refugee influxes and have remained unchanged. A camp is divided into blocks; the number of blocks in a camp is not fixed, and it can be as few as two and as many as 120 (NPM Round 10 Site Assessment).

A block has, on average, 500 residents (100 households). The population of a block is not fixed, meaning that it can be larger. According to the NPM Round 10 dataset, almost 600 blocks have more than 500 residents, with the largest reporting as many as 4,900 (NPM Round 10 Site Assessment).

Response planning takes place both at the camp and block level, depending on the context. The Analysis Hub analysis suggests that camp level planning hides the intra-camp variations, which are more significant than inter-camp variations. This means that differences in needs tend to be more pronounced between blocks within the same camp than between camps.

Government of Bangladesh

The **Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR)** is responsible for the refugee response and thus for the governance of the Rohingya camps and settlements. The **Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner** (RRRC) represents the MoDMR in the Rohingya response. The RRRC had been previously in charge of managing the registered refugee population only, but after the 2017 influx its mandate was extended to cover all Rohingya people in these settlements (JRP 03/2018). The RRRC appoints civil servants on a rotation basis to act as **Camp-in-Charges** in all camps and settlements. These individuals are the government's representatives as the camp level. They are responsible for daily administration, coordination, and delivery of services, in conjunction with the army (UNHCR & WFP 2008).

The **Bangladeshi Army** has a significant role in disaster response in Bangladesh. They participate in evacuation, rescue, relief and rehabilitation operations (Government of Bangladesh 06/04/2010; ISCG 24/12/2017). In the Rohingya crisis, the army was the first responder. It works with the CiCs and is responsible for overseeing food and NFIs distributions as well as safety and security in the camps. Civilian law enforcement agencies such as the police are not commonly deployed in camps. The army has also been in charge of constructing roads and infrastructure and has supported the biometric registration of all Rohingya conducted by the Ministry of Home Affairs. In the first phase of the emergency, the army was in charge of organising relief distribution activities, and where no CiC had been established, they also dealt with day-to-day administration (JRP 03/2018; ACAPS 22/11/2017). A **Camp Commander** coordinates military activities in camps (ISCG 24/12/2017).

The Majhi System

The direct translation of **"majhi"** from Bangla to English is "boatman". The word was originally used to refer to the boat captains who help Rohingya cross the Naf river from Myanmar to Bangladesh.

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[3] The ISCG and Site Management Sector revised the definitions of the site types in March 2018. The classification is confirmed while names are provisional. Further information available in the NPM Methodology document (NPM Methodology 03/2018).

[4] Spontaneous settlements are refugee encampments established during the 2017 influx (NPM Methodology 03/2018).

Origins of the majhi system

The majhi system was established after the 1991-92 Rohingya influx. Individual refugees were appointed as leaders, known as "mahjis", by government officials to support the CiCs and the police in maintaining control and order and act as focal points for camp management activities (UNHCR 03/2007). The process for appointing majhis was not formalised, and it is difficult to know the criteria that were used at the time. A similar system had been in place in IDP camps in Rakhine State, where some refugees were appointed by the government to fulfil a similar role as a key liaison between the Myanmar military and the Rohingya population.

The majhi system was abolished in the registered refugee camps managed by UNHCR (Kutapalong and Nayapara refugee camps) in 2007 due to widespread corruption and abuse of power (UNHCR 05/2007; ICG 16/05/2018). In makeshift settlements, where humanitarian assistance was limited by the government, majhis remained a dominant force and part of the camp governance structure (UNHCR 2011; IOM 2016).

Selection of majhis post 2017-influx

As a result of the 2017 influx, the majhi system was revived as the Government of Bangladesh needed to organise a large number of people very quickly. Typically, a majhi oversees one block. The army selected and appointed them informally. The process of majhi selection is not codified and there are no specific rules for it. In some cases, it is based on inputs from the community or on the specific characteristics of the block, but this cannot be generalised for all camps where the system is in place.

Role of the majhi

The mahjis' main tasks were initially to support the estimation of refugee populations, organisation of distribution efforts, and channelling communication to the refugee community. Over time this list of tasks has continued to expand and include other responsibilities, such as handling small disputes and guaranteeing security. Majhis are often used by humanitarian organisations as key informants for assessments and for project planning. Both the army and the CiC use the majhis as focal points for camp governance. This provides the majhis with their position of power within the refugee community, despite them not having formal decision-making powers on camp governance. The CiCs consult the majhis in regular meetings. These meetings are both bilateral and meetings where a broader participation from the refugee community is present, alongside the majhi.

Majhis have a responsibility to represent their block. Where no community participation initiatives are in place, refugees do not always know to whom to address their problems other than the majhi. Refugees reported that they would not know how to resolve issues larger than small incidents and disputes (UNHCR Rapid Protection Assessment 15/10/2017).

The mahji structure

Above the majhi there is a head majhi. In an effort to centralise the system, a majhi reports to a head majhi who then reports to the army/CiC. In practice, however, the lines of communication are less clear cut, and there can be reporting between a majhi and the CiC/army. Similarly, there may be cases in which refugees bring their complaints to the head majhi rather than the majhi. The majhis self-appoint groups of volunteers to help them perform their tasks.

Profile of the majhis

Majhis are almost always male. Out of over 1,200 majhis employed as key informants in the NPM Round 9 Site Assessment, there was only one female (NPM Round 9 Site Assessment). Often, majhis are men in their 40s and 50s, although some are younger. Some have a higher degree of informal education, owned businesses in Myanmar, and/or took some form of leadership role while fleeing Myanmar.

There have been reports from some refugees concerned that their majhi is not strong enough and cannot speak English well enough to adequately fulfil their protection and support function (UNHCR Rapid Protection Assessment 15/10/2017).

Accountability and protection

Over the years, the majhi system has been criticised for being prone to abuse of power and exploitation. The most significant and common reports of abuse of power include; paying for Bangladeshi nationality papers, diversion of aid and sexual exploitation and abuse (WFP; UNHCR 06/2008; UNHCR 03/2007; UNHCR 05/2007; Maitra 2017; Akhter 06/2014).

The revival of the majhi system gives rise to accountability and protection concerns. Majhis again hold a power position, which they can abuse. The volunteer system is at risk of being a form of patronage. Corrupt majhis can reward loyalty from their volunteers by taking advantage of their position of power within the camps. Checks and balances are needed to ensure majhis do not have impunity and do not exploit other refugees. For this reason, various community participation initiatives have also been put in place within settlements to expand the channels of communication and engagement between humanitarian agencies and the refugee community.

The CiC has oversight of the majhis, and there are efforts by the army and the CiC to keep majhi corruption at bay. Complaints can trigger a dismissal or other forms of sanctions. However, the process is not codified and remains quite discretionary, raising protection concerns of its own.

Camp and block Committees

After 2007, **Camp Committees and Block Committees (CC+BC)** were instituted in registered refugee camps, Kutupalong RC and Nayapara RC.

Role of Camp and Block Committees

The committees are intended to provide representative refugee leadership and forums for refugee participation in camp governance (UNHCR 2011). Refugee representatives are enlisted as channels of information between refugees and the humanitarian community. They serve a consultative role for identifying priorities, planning activities, and implementing programs. In this sense, the committees are not decision-making bodies. Refugee representatives help inform, educate, and activate other refugees to facilitate humanitarian aid (Olivius 2014).

The committees meet with the site management agencies once a week, and with the CiC once a month. Sector Focal Points within the committees also participate in monthly coordination meetings that are chaired by the partners responsible for sector specific services within a camp. The CiCs have adopted an open-door policy for refugee representatives to bring up issues.

Committee selection

The committees are composed by elected representatives and have an established gender quota. In 2008, this amounted to 30 to 40% (UNHCR/WFP 06/2008). Prior to the influx, representatives were voted by universal suffrage among the registered refugee population over 18 years of age, forming block committees of seven members, of which two were female, for a term of two years. Within the BC, a block leader, deputy leader, and assistant were chosen; of these, either the leader or deputy leader had to be a woman. This block leadership team went on to form the camp committee, with three representatives from each block. The other members then assumed sector- and issue specific focal point roles. Camp Leader, Deputy Leader, and Camp Assistant are then elected again democratically in a secret ballot among the camp committee members. Again, either the Camp Leader or Deputy Camp Leader had to be a woman. Likewise, other camp committee members then assumed sector and issue specific focal point roles. This process was facilitated by UNHCR and the RRRC, who also drafted terms of reference, codes of conduct, and other guidelines. In Nayapara RC, where the system is currently in place, there are 49 Block representatives (including 14 women) and 21 Camp representatives (including 7 women).

UNHCR are currently piloting new guidelines with the aim of adapting the system to the new, post-influx operational context. The new guidelines depart from a "one-person-one-vote" electoral process and introduce a system of nominated block candidates. The block candidates then select smaller BCs of three to four members for a shorter term of one year, who then go on to represent the block at camp level. Both the nomination and selection processes are jointly overseen by humanitarian agencies and the CiC, who come together in the Nomination Review Board for this purpose.

This new system sacrifices to some extent the democratic credentials of the original system, but the change was seen as necessary as a transitional step that requires fewer resources and less time to establish during the present operational context following the 2017 influx. In the longer term from 2019, however, UNHCR aims at reintroducing the original system. In Kutupalong RC, where the new system will be in place from June 2018, there will be 28 Block/Camp representatives, including 14 female representatives. At the same time in part of Camp 26, specifically NYP Shalbagan, the new system will replace the majhis there with 12 Block/Camp representatives, including 6 female representatives.

In collaboration with the respective CiCs, these new guidelines will be piloted progressively across the other refugee camps managed by UNHCR and its site management partners.

Functioning and accountability

Within the Camp and Block Committees, most issues are handled through a process of discussion and consensus. For instances where consensus is elusive, there is also a formal voting process. This is regulated following parliamentary voting principles: an absolute majority is needed to approve a decision, granted that a quorum of eligible voters is reached. There are mechanisms in place to suspend or replace elected officials refugee representatives if they do not fulfil their duties or if they violate role according to the code of conduct. The CC can suspend a member for a timeframe of one month or more or recommend their permanent removal for sever malfeasance. UNHCR, site management agency, and the CiC also jointly oversee the work of committee members and can trigger a suspension or dismissal, after having conducted an investigation.

Para Development Committees

In the case of collective sites with host communities, also referred to as "paras" or neighbourhoods around villages where host communities and refugees live side by side, new governance stuctures have been tested that engage both refugees and host communities, **Para Development Committees (PDCs).**

Role of PDCs

PDCs are an instrument to facilitate interactions between refugee and host communities. They support both communities in identifying common needs, work on common solutions, and solve minor disputes between them. The PDCs liaise with the humanitarian community and Bangladeshi authorities directly for the provision of services and distribution of available resources at community level.

Selection of the PDCs

Members are from both the refugee and host communities (five and six, respectively), and are selected in community meetings. Within each PDCs one chairman, vice-chairman, secretary, and treasurers are selected, who form the leadership team that will interact with the leadership teams of other PDCs. The remaining six members then go on to lead issue-specific community-level committees, one each. At least three members of a PDC have to be female; these are selected by the female participants in the community meetings. The term is six months, with the leadership team remaining in power for a year to ensure continuity.

Functioning and accountability

Meetings are held at least once a month, and decisions taken by absolute majority. The PDC can bring a motion of no confidence against a member to the SMS agency, RRRC, or **local government authorities (10)**. The member is replaced until the end of the term.

Community participation initiatives

In some, but not all, new camps and settlements, **community participation initiatives** have been set up by humanitarian actors in parallel with the majhi system, in the form of participatory groups, committees, and other initiatives. These have, in some cases, an issue or sectoral focus and an advisory function for programming. In others, they have a more general focus, and are forums for refugees to bring up any issue or concern and discuss solutions. Participants are usually selected in town-hall style discussions facilitated by humanitarian actors or refugees self-select their participation according to their interests. The function of these initiatives can vary according to their intended purpose. Many are mainly channels of communication between the refugees, the humanitarian community, and the CiC, while other initiatives support refugees to design and undertake small-scale projects that address problems within their settlement.

These are community groups aimed at fostering self-organisation and self-determination among refugees. These groups can be designed as part of other programs (such as a club for students at a camp learning center), to address a particular need (such as a

network to assist persons with disabilities), or to engage a defined demographic within a camp (such as groups for women, men, and youth).

Collectively community participation initiatives also provide community fora and spaces for refugees to express their concerns and views separate from the majhis, who might be otherwise considered as the only spokespersons of the refugee community. As majhis are almost exclusively male, these initiatives are especially important for female refugees, and many committees/groups aim for female representation of at least 50% when they are not segregated. Some difficulties have been encountered with enabling female participation; these are largely linked to social norms and customs in regard to female participation in public life.

Majhis have different degrees of involvement with community participation initiatives, depending on the model. For example, the committee structure set up by IOM in camp 22 (Unchiprang) or the one set up by Christian Aid in camp 15 (Jamtoli), foresee camp and block level structures involving both majhis and other refugees, whereas other models, such as the one ran by the Danish Refugee Council in camps 2E, 2W, 5, 6, 7, 8E leave majhis out of the structure. In another model, such as within camp 18, the presence of male majhis is counterbalanced by having a similar group of female refugee leaders.