

## Chittagonian and Rohingya: Differences and similarities

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# Chittagonian and Rohingya: So near and yet so far

At the start of every TWB language training, the attendees are given a worksheet with five images – a dog, window, pregnant woman, mountain, and a child. The worksheet is not just an ice-breaker exercise; their task is to identify the names of the images in Bangla, Chittagonian (also known as Chatgaya), and Rohingya. They start by whispering to each other quietly, but in a matter of minutes, loud debates erupt.

*“That’s not how you say dog in Chittagonian!”*

*“Do you mean a male child or female child?  
The Rohingya language has different words.”*

*“Aren’t Chittagonian and Rohingya the same?”*



These questions don’t come as a surprise. The Rohingya refugee response is taking place in a diverse linguistic landscape. There are many languages being communicated amongst various communities using a range of alphabets.

Though anecdotally Chittagonian and Rohingya are considered very similar languages, a recent TWB study found that more than 30 percent of the Rohingya population could not understand a basic sentence in Chittagonian<sup>1</sup>. This means a large proportion of the population will struggle to access life-saving information if it is only delivered in spoken Chittagonian.

# WHAT MATTERS?

## Humanitarian Feedback Bulletin on Rohingya Response

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It is not surprising that Rohingya refugees have a strong preference for communication in Rohingya. However, that is not always practical or possible. Chittagonian speakers are therefore a pivotal component of communication in the camps. They often bridge the gap between English and Bangla speakers, and the Rohingya speakers.

### Differences and similarities between Chittagonian and Rohingya

Like all languages, where you come from influences the words you use. For example, someone from Melbourne, Australia, may use some English terms that are not familiar to someone from New York city or London. But all of those people speak English, and for the most part, they can understand each other.

Chittagonian shows similar geographical variations; someone who lives in Chattogram city will speak a different Chittagonian dialect to someone living in Teknaf. Generally, the differences will not hinder understanding between Chittagonian speakers from different areas. However, the gaps between different Chittagonian dialects and the Rohingya language can be significant. It is important for Chittagonian speakers to understand the extent of variation between their particular dialect and Rohingya.

The Chittagonian dialect spoken around Cox’s Bazar and in towns further south is closer to the Rohingya language than the dialect spoken in northern parts of Chattogram. This applies to both pronunciation and choice of vocabulary. For example, *shom-ola* means ‘pregnancy’ for both Rohingya and southern Chittagonian speakers. However, it is not understood in the north, where they prefer to say *gorbito*, derived from Bangla *ghorboboti*. The word for ‘dog’ is *kuyir* in both Rohingya and southern Chittagonian but *kuttei* in northern Chittagonian.

1 TWB, The language lesson: What we’ve learned about communicating with Rohingya refugees, <http://www.shongjog.org.bd/news/i/?id=aee7eb5e-bcbb-420c-80d9-92b4d41407db>

There is also a generational component. The younger generations, particularly those that are educated or involved in commerce, incorporate more standard Bangla terms into their Chittagonian conversations. Many of these terms are not familiar to the Rohingya community. Older Chittagonian speakers still use many Arabic, Farsi, and local terms that are also used in the Rohingya language.

These geographical and generational differences may explain the conflicting notions of how close Chittagonian and Rohingya languages are to one another. Humanitarians and interpreters that are native to the southernmost parts of Cox's Bazar district may find their language and that of a Rohingya speaker's from Maungdaw – just across the Naf River – very similar. However, the further away from the border region (for both the Chittagonian and Rohingya speaker), the more different their languages may be.

### Chittagonian: a dialect or a language?

While the Bangladesh government accepts Rohingya as a distinct language, it views Chittagonian as a regional dialect of Bangla, and not as a distinct language. This

is despite low mutual intelligibility between a speaker of standard Bangla and someone that knows only Chittagonian.

Like Rohingya, Chittagonian is an unwritten, oral language, although there have been some attempts at writing it, such as social media users writing in Chittagonian using Bangla script. Recently, the Dhaka-based International Mother Language Institute published a Chittagonian-Bangla-English dictionary.

Chittagonians without a Bangla education are unlikely to understand many technical and administrative Bangla words, like *bikash* ('development') and *kendro* ('centre'). It is even more difficult for Bangla speakers to understand Chittagonian, which exhibits tonality and has a large number of foreign loanwords that were not adopted into Bangla.

This lack of linguistic identity makes it difficult to assess which languages national staff in Cox's Bazar speak. Many Bangladeshis accept the government's position that Chittagonian is not a distinct language, so they are reluctant to acknowledge explicitly that they speak it. When asked, many local aid workers claim to speak

the 'local language' (*ediyar hotha*) or 'regional language' (*ansolik basha*), meaning they speak a local variety of Bangla, instead of saying they speak Chittagonian.

### Why Chittagonian matters

Whenever possible, organisations should use Rohingya interpreters and volunteers in the response to avoid miscommunication. However, given that this is not always possible, and many interpreters in the response are Chittagonian speakers, these staff should be supported with terminology training to ensure accurate communication and encouraged to routinely confirm their understanding of a message such as repeating and restating the other person's idea.

Chittagonian speakers play a key role in facilitating communication between foreign humanitarians, Bangladeshi national staff, and the Rohingya community. Language training workshops will help Chittagonian interpreters to understand these language differences and communication gaps, and be more aware of potential miscommunication.

## Livelihoods, safety and security top the list of host community worries

Over the last ten months, half of the questions posed by the host community on the radio programme Betar Sanglap were around livelihoods. This was followed by questions around social and security issues (e.g. personal safety, criminal activities etc.) and the environment.

### Livelihoods

Concerns included people losing jobs to Rohingya people who are prepared to work for a lower wage; locals struggling to run their business; farmers losing their land

Source: To understand the views of the host community, questions put forward by live audiences of the 'Betar Sanglap' radio programme were analysed to understand the concerns of the local people regarding the Rohingya crisis. In total 312 questions have been put forward across 10 programmes held in Ukhiya and Teknaf from February to December 2018 (not all of these questions were asked on-air due to time constraints). Betar Sanglap is produced by Bangladesh Betar, with support from UNICEF and BBC Media Action. In addition, Focus Group Discussions were conducted in Palangkhali Union of Thaingskhali, Ukhiya to explore these issues more.

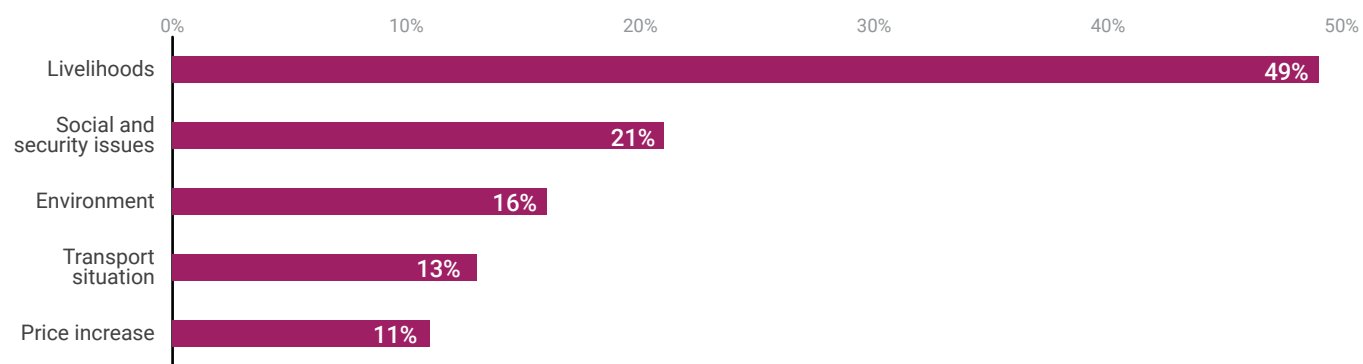


Figure 1: Top five concerns among the host community due to Rohingya influx (N=312)

and means of income; and fishermen no longer being able to fish on the River Naf. These issues were raised most by people with lower incomes such as fishermen, farmers, day labourers and small business owners.

Focus group respondents mentioned that, although they are not allowed to, Rohingya people are freely moving around and working outside the camps. According to host community respondents, shops and workshops have replaced locals with Rohingya workers as they are willing to work for around half the wage needed to hire a local. People also said that the owners of the tom toms (battery powered vehicles) are hiring Rohingya drivers as they are prepared to give the owners a higher percentage of their takings.

People are also worried about local skilled labourers – like carpenters and construction workers – losing out on jobs because Rohingya people with those skills are prepared to work for a lower wage. Local shop owners claimed that the sales in their shops have decreased because Rohingya people are selling relief goods at the roadside or by going door-to-door.

“ I had to invest and pay for the position at the shop. I had to invest in the goods in the shop. I had to pay for the trade licence and other taxes. And then I am doing business. But the Rohingyas are just coming and sitting beside the roads and selling their [relief] products. As they can afford to sell at a lower price, people are buying from them and we are losing business.”

– Grocery shop owner, Thaingkhali, Ukhiya

“ If someone needs a carpenter or a construction worker or an agriculture worker, she or he does not look for local workers any more. Instead, they go directly to the camps and hire workers as Rohingyas work for lower pay.”

– Woman, 32, Thaingkhali, Ukhiya

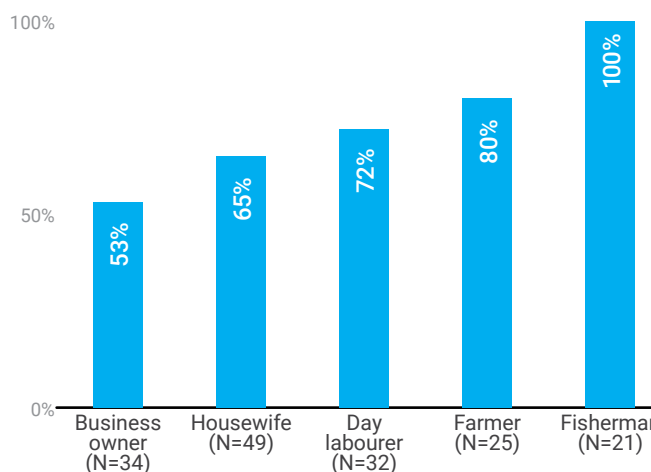


Figure 2: Proportion of the concerns raised by people from different occupations which were about livelihoods

Women’s ability to work has also been hampered by the Rohingya situation, according to the community. Women who were previously hired by richer families to do household chores say that, now, Rohingya women are getting hired instead, because they are willing to work for lower pay. Participants also mentioned that women used to work in agriculture growing crops like cucumber, tamarind, ginger, pineapple, watermelon and betel leaf but the government land previously used for this work had now been given over to house Rohingya people. Women also talked about how they used to keep hens and ducks to earn money but that these birds now frequently go missing. They also complained that cows, goats and vegetables grown in their backyards were being stolen.

### ⚠️ Social and safety issues

Both men and women raised questions around social and safety issues (22% of the issues raised by women were in this category, and 19% of those raised by men).

Focus group participants talked about how, after the arrival of the Rohingya people, incidents of theft have increased significantly. Cash, gold, mobile phones, solar

panels and batteries are the things that people claimed were most frequently stolen.

“ A few days ago, the solar panel and battery from my shop has been stolen. The solar panel of the kindergarden school and the mosque was also stolen. A Rohingya was apprehended while stealing a cow from just beside my shop from which the solar and battery was stolen.”

– Construction material businessman, Thaingkhali, Ukhiya

Participants thought that incidents of robbery and mugging had increased significantly, especially at night in areas near the camps. They also talked about how they believed Rohingya people were being used in different criminal activities like smuggling, kidnapping and contract killing. People also mentioned that Rohingya individuals were making fake Bangladeshi national ID cards in the local computer shops; and there were also concerns about social issues such as polygamy and marriage between locals and Rohingya people.

### 🌿 Environmental issues

Questions raised in Betar Sanglap talked about the quality of water and air, deforestation and destruction of hills. Focus group participants mentioned that the local canals have been heavily polluted by waste from the Rohingya camps. As a result, they were depending more on deep tube wells, which they found to be very expensive and were fearful that using deep tube wells would reduce underground water levels. They also mentioned that the destruction of forests and trees has led to more dust, which they felt had led to increased illness, especially diarrhoea.

“ There is a mosque beside the canal in our area. We cannot properly say our prayers in that mosque because of the bad smell that comes from the canal which has been filled with waste coming from the Rohingya camps.”

– Student, male, 19, Thaingkhali, Ukhiya

# Rohingya community feedback: Rohingya community's relationship with the host community

Source: Feedback collected between December 2 and December 15 by 20 Internews Community Correspondents and one feedback manager using Kobo Collect app in camps 1E, 1W, 2E, 2W, 3, 4 and 4E. In total, 234 interactions have been analysed to present the significant concerns and questions of the Rohingya community, of which 69 issues related to the host community. The feedback is collected in Rohingya using English and Bangla scripts.

**Internews**

December 02 – December 15, 2018

Total Feedback

234



112



122

Over 15 months since the largest mass exodus of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh, relationships between the host community and the refugees have been forged across the now densely packed hills of Ukhia. Rohingya respondents shared their concerns and feedback with community correspondents about the dynamic of their own relationships with the host community as they relate to economic activities, resource sharing, and general interactions. In the past few weeks, there was significant overlap between the refugees' descriptions of their own resource priorities and disclosures of how they related to encounters with the host community. Feedback analysis shows that Rohingya community members seemed most concerned about how their relationship with the host community, whether positive or negative, impacted their ability to meet practical resource needs.

Analysis of the feedback indicates that the Rohingya community members have concerns related to the following sub-themes:

- Having enough money to pay for land rental and concerns the host community will abuse or beat them if they do not pay.
- Access issues for going to the hills to collect firewood as the host community abuses them and takes money from them when they do go.
- Education-related concerns because their children are not receiving proper education as the Government of Bangladesh has not given permission to establish a school on their land for Rohingya children.
- Inability to share facilities like washrooms, latrines, or tube wells even in case of emergency.
- Lack of free movement at night because they want to avoid conflict with some drug users in the host community.
- Worries their children do not share healthy relationships with the children from the host community.

Feedback from the Rohingya community illustrates how the nature of interactions with the host community has changed since they first arrived and continues to evolve.

“ We have a good relationship with the host community. For example, we have good relationship with our landowner. In the other block people might quarrel with their landowner but we don't have any quarrel with our landowner. If we quarrel with one another in our block, our landowner comes and solves it. Our landowner is very good. When we came from Myanmar, they used to take Tk. 200 from us but in the last 2/3 months they haven't taken any rent from us because the CIC prohibited them from taking rent. Nowadays they take as much as we are willing to pay. They don't force people who do not have the ability to pay. We live on the land where they used to farm. Keeping that in mind, we pay them as much as we can. That is why we say that we have a good relationship with the host community.”

– Male, 37, camp 1E

“ When we came and started building a shelter here, we had to give Tk. 1000 as rent to the local people. From this month we are now paying Tk. 300 as rent. If we cannot pay rent to them, they want to break our shelters or tell us to move to elsewhere. But we don't move because building this shelter took a lot of effort. If we move elsewhere, where can we get money to build another shelter? How can we pay rent when we don't have money to even buy groceries? We paid rent before by selling a portion of food aid, such as rice and lentils, that we get. So if we pay rent by selling some of our food, we have to suffer a lot to eat properly during the month with the remainder of our food. We don't communicate with them because they misbehave if they see any of our children go to their house.”

– Female, 31, camp 1E

How Rohingya people characterise their relationship largely depends on where they have been living and the specific interactions they have had with the host community there.

Many of the Rohingya respondents mentioned their economic relationship with the host community, sharing their experiences of renting land to live on. While reported experiences varied between different camps and blocks,

there was a general consensus that many Rohingya refugees have had to pay rent to the host community for using their land when they first arrived in Bangladesh. A minority of the responses reflected a positive relationship with the host community where rent was no longer being collected. Those who continue to pay rent do see it as a point of contention because they do not have access to enough money and must sell their aid distributions or barter with these items to pay the rental fees. Many of those who do pay rent said they did not have enough food to meet their essential needs after covering the cost of rent. Still some Rohingya people described a largely harmonious relationship where the host community did not exert pressure on them and where they shared and helped each other.

“ The tube-well for drinking water is near the houses of the host community. When we go to fetch water, they misbehave with whoever is going to take water and they don't allow us to fetch it. They say, *'As you are living on our land, you have to follow whatever we tell you.'* We have to give them 1 kg of rice every month. If we can't, they insult us saying, *'Move from our land.'* We do not have a good relationship with them.”

– Male, 25, camp 1W

“ We are sharing a latrine in our block with the host community. We have a good relationship with them and we do not fight with each other.”

– Female, 50, camp 1W

“ Cooking food is problem because we do not get enough firewood. As we are new refugees, we do not have money to buy firewood. When we go to the hills to collect firewood, the local people of Bangladesh beat us and take away our firewood. We Rohingya refugees cannot go to hill to collect firewood because of the local people. So we want a gas stove.”

– Male, 25, camp 1W

“ There is space in the block but the host community will not give it to us. The host community wants money from us to build a school. Rohingya refugees replied, *'Where will we get money?'* We have told this to NGOs. The NGOs replied that if you manage to get a space, we can provide a school with teachers...”

– Male, 50, camp 2E

Insufficient natural resources and access to basic facilities emerged as the most significant source of tension reported between Rohingya people and the host community. Many refugees described how a lack of sufficient water and firewood or access to latrines led them to ask the host community for help or go out to the hills to look for resources. Efforts by the Rohingya community to access necessary resources or use the facilities of the host community had mixed results with a number of Rohingya people reporting that they were denied, were asked for money, or suffered abuse. However, a small number of contributors said they had a positive relationship with the host community and engaged in mutual resource sharing. Differing understandings of land use rights are at the heart of many disputes between Rohingya people and the host community, affecting a number of issues from establishing schools to having permission to collect firewood.

“ All Rohingya refugees here have a good relationship with the host community. When we came, they gave us land near their houses to live on. In the beginning, whenever we asked for help from them, they helped us as much as they could. In other places, people have to pay for the land or house. But we never paid for this. When there is any kind of fair, meeting or function, we invite the host community and they come. If we need to borrow something, we can easily borrow from the host community. We share a loving relationship with the host community.”

– Male, 65, camp 1E

The majority of the Rohingya community have had some form of interaction with the host community that has shaped their view.. Those who reported having the most interactions with the host community are the Rohingya families who share facilities with them, while others have much more limited encounters because of where they are located in the camps.

BBC Media Action, Internews, and Translators without Borders are working together to collect and collate feedback from communities affected by the Rohingya crisis. This summary aims to provide a snapshot of feedback received from Rohingya and host communities, to assist sectors to better plan and implement relief activities with communities' needs and preferences in mind.

The work is being delivered in partnership with IOM, the UN migration agency, and is funded by EU humanitarian aid and the UK Department for International Development.

If you have any comments, questions or suggestions regarding *What Matters?*, you are welcome to get in touch with the team by emailing [info@cxbfeedback.org](mailto:info@cxbfeedback.org)