

# HOW CAN START FUND BANGLADESH DO MORE TO ENSURE: **EFFECTIVE RESPONSES, SHARED LEARNING & POWER SHIFTS?**

## INTRODUCTION

In 2019, Start Fund Bangladesh opened up its membership to 26 local and national organisations enabling them to **access direct funding and become involved in decision-making around funding and responses**. As a direct result, 80% of all Start Fund Bangladesh funding had been awarded directly to local and national organisations in 2020. This directive to shift the power has also been explored in other ways. For example, Start Fund Bangladesh has also been working to encourage INGOs who have local implementing partners to share overhead costs so that these can be used to **grow and strengthen local organisations**.

To understand more about further changes that Start Fund Bangladesh could make, we listened to some of the reflections of Sina Chowdhury and Sirajul Islam who work for two of the local organisations that joined in 2019. Sina Chowdhury is Assistant Director for **POPI** (People's Orientated Program Implementation) [quotes in green] and Sirajul Islam is Director of programmes at **AVAS** (Association of Voluntary Actions for Society) [quotes in orange]. The verbatim quotes from the interviews provide a powerful and rich narrative around their experience working with Start Fund Bangladesh and as humanitarians and have led us to formulate three main lessons for the Start Network:

1

**BE MORE  
INCLUSIVE TO BE  
MORE EFFECTIVE**

2

**UPSKILL  
TO EMPOWER**

3

**CHAMPION  
FOR CHANGE**

**THIS REPORT WOULD BE OF INTEREST TO ALL THOSE WORKING TOWARDS A SYSTEM CHANGE TO A MORE  
LOCALLY LED HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM THAT IS MORE ACCOUNTABLE TO THOSE AFFECTED BY CRISIS.**



## BE MORE INCLUSIVE TO BE MORE EFFECTIVE



**START FUND BANGLADESH RESPONSES ARE FAST, TRANSPARENT AND REACH THOSE MOST LIKELY TO BE OVERLOOKED, BUT COULD BE EVEN BETTER IF THEY COORDINATED MORE WITH GOVERNMENT AND GREW THE NETWORK OF LOCAL PARTNERS.**

### START FUND BANGLADESH IS EFFECTIVE BECAUSE IT IS TIMELY...

Start Fund Bangladesh is part of the Start Network Start Funds and was built around its key attributes of speed, flexibility, transparency in decision-making and targeting overlooked crises. Both local partners acknowledged this uniqueness of Start Fund Bangladesh. They described how other actors often come far too late and that this rapid turnaround in decision-making and release of funds, and expectations in reaching communities within a week, was initially something that they thought would not be possible.

*It was previously unforeseen and unimaginable for us working in the humanitarian response sector in Bangladesh, that within 72 hours of a crisis or emergency, it was possible to provide aid to the affected people and actively engage in humanitarian response.*

*When working with most other international organisations and funders, we often find that the humanitarian response is so delayed that it comes much after the crisis or emergency situation has ended. However, Start requires that the response is conducted in a timely and efficient manner.*

*If it was not for Start Network, the position of some of the most vulnerable communities in Bangladesh would have further deteriorated. Start Network and Start Fund Bangladesh works with those communities that are often ignored by the government and other international organisations.*

*The most vulnerable and downtrodden, those who were completely overlooked and left unattended are now receiving some relief and aid, and we are able to reach such people because of Start Network. This is such an immense and unparalleled achievement and source for tremendous inspiration.*

### ...TRANSPARENT AND REACHES THOSE MOST OVERLOOKED.

They spoke about the value of transparency in Start Fund Bangladesh decision-making and functioning, adding that they believe we should actually do more in monitoring how funds are being used. They also recognised the value in targeting crises and communities affected by crises that are most likely to be overlooked by governments and civil society highlighting that this is also facilitated by having local partners raising alerts.

*Working with Start Fund Bangladesh has allowed us to strengthen the consortium of local organisations, and we are able to work together in the formulation of project proposals, and deliberate on the best course of action for its implementation.*

*There is a constant chain of communication to facilitate consultations and deliberations among member organisations of the Start Network and smaller community-based organisations, which allows us to coordinate our efforts.*

### IT HAS STRENGTHENED IN-COUNTRY COORDINATION...

Both local partners spoke about the existence of other national level platforms and consortiums established before Start Fund Bangladesh to ensure better coordination of responses and that these have now been strengthened. In particular, Start Fund Bangladesh have facilitated consultations with smaller community-based organisations and ensured that key actors are brought under the umbrella of the Start Network, member or not.



# BE MORE INCLUSIVE TO BE MORE EFFECTIVE



*A problem that often plagues the humanitarian sector in Bangladesh is that projects and programmes are forced upon local organisations, and they are bound to implement the programmes designed and structured by the donor, regardless of whether it is in sync with the needs and expectations of the targeted community, or the exigencies of a particular situation. Through our interaction with the Start Network, we ... have found an avenue where we have the freedom to make decisions and design the project and adopt the best course of action as per our expertise and capabilities.*

## ...AND LOCAL ORGANISATIONS ARE INVOLVED IN DECISION-MAKING.

Being involved in decision-making was seen as a real positive and something that was unique for local organisations. The organisations reflected on their previous experience working with other donors or partners where they are directed and not listened to, despite being in the best position to understand community needs.

## BUT IT COULD BE MORE EFFECTIVE IF IT ENGAGED MORE WITH GOVERNMENT AS THIS WOULD ALSO INFLUENCE ITS OWN PRACTICES...

It was suggested that more work could be done to bring additional government agencies and institutions into the discussions and think about how to engage with local government as well. This would not only be a positive in terms of improved coordination but would assist in continuing the positive influence that Start Fund Bangladesh has had on how governments deliver assistance. One of the partners provided the example of cash transfers as something that previously the government would have been hesitant about supporting but were now implementing following the example of Start Fund Bangladesh activities.

*Start has a lot more potential in bringing governmental agencies and institutions within its fold to facilitate conversations between humanitarian actors from the civil society and their counterpart governmental institutions. ... Start Network also does not really play a role in liaising with local governments at the district level and this is something we could consider.*

*Through the Start Network and Start Fund we have also been able to liaise and establish relations and networks with different governmental organisations and bodies. Through this association the Bangladesh government has also been encouraged to consider alternative and effective modes of humanitarian response.*

## ...AND GROW THIS NETWORK OF LOCAL PARTNERS.

*If the Start Fund could enlist and involve more local and national organisations in its membership and functioning, then its reach could be expanded significantly to every region and district of Bangladesh... it could ensure that in any situation of crisis or emergency in any corner of Bangladesh, an effective and efficient humanitarian response would be possible.*

Having local organisations as part of the alerting processes was mentioned previously as one way to help identify overlooked crises. It was suggested that if Start Fund Bangladesh was able to grow this network of local partners, they could have the potential to be alerted to all the small and neglected crises across the geographical region of Bangladesh.

## 2 UPSKILL TO EMPOWER



### START FUND BANGLADESH FACILITATES A SPACE FOR SHARED LEARNING AND BUILDING THE CONFIDENCE OF LOCAL ORGANISATIONS BUT COULD DO MORE TO UPSKILL THEM SO THEY CAN HAVE A MORE ACTIVE ROLE IN DECISION-MAKING.

#### THE DUE DILIGENCE PROCESS IMPROVED PRACTICES...

The partners reported that one of the main gains in being part of Start Fund Bangladesh was the opportunity for learning. This learning started as early as the membership process itself, where due diligence assisted in identifying and remedying weaknesses in current practices and policies. One partner spoke about how important it was that they were now adhering to humanitarian core standards, especially around consultation with communities.

*The Start Network is the first international organisation working in Bangladesh to start a conversation around international humanitarian standards, best practices, code of conduct... we have learnt the skills required to engage in effective humanitarian response and been able to address the gaps in our procedure and functioning.*

*The consortium of local and national organisations that the Start Fund Bangladesh and Start Network have facilitated, has in turn led to greater knowledge learning and sharing between the partner organisations. ...We are able to learn from each other's successes and failures in field work, policy formulation, and project design.*

*In all my experience, the kind of platform that the Start Fund Bangladesh has been able to create to facilitate an exchange of ideas and experiences and bring together an exceptionally diverse range of actors, individuals and organisations is unmatched...*

#### ... AND SHARED LEARNING HAS HELPED ORGANISATIONS TO FIND SOLUTIONS.

This opportunity for learning and sharing knowledge and experiences continued as the agencies worked together on finding solutions to mutual problems. This was not only confined to coordination or project design but extended to the more political issues of navigating through bureaucracy and possible gatekeepers at the community level.

*Start Fund Bangladesh always values the opinions that the consortium puts forward and has given us the platform and freedom to determine the nature and scope of our activities on the field...In working with us, the Start Network has been able to gain an insight into the issues that prevail at the ground level...*

#### THEIR LOCAL KNOWLEDGE HAS BEEN VALUED...

The partners felt that they were being listened to, that Start Network and Start Fund Bangladesh valued their inputs, opinions and experience, especially in better understanding the issues and needs of affected communities.

*We understand the issues and the crisis faced by the people of this region better than most other. We have also pioneered several successful models to ensure disaster preparedness for this region and have shared our learning with the Network, which have been very well received...*

*Start Network's greatest asset and its primary source of potential lies within its educated, knowledgeable, aware, and experienced members...To ensure that we are able to have a positive and desirable impact on the humanitarian sector, the first and most urgent step is for us to ensure that members possess the skills, knowledge and capacities to effectuate the change that we want to see...*

#### ... BUT MORE COULD BE DONE TO UPSKILL ITS BIGGEST ASSET – ITS MEMBERS!

The main request was that Start Network recognises that its greatest asset is its members and partners and that to truly make an impact, they need to be provided with the skills and knowledge needed to make the changes they want to see.

# 3

## CHAMPION FOR CHANGE



**DIRECTLY FUNDING LOCAL ORGANISATIONS HAS EMPOWERED THEM TO HAVE MORE CONTROL OVER THEIR WORK AND AN OPPORTUNITY TO INVEST FINANCIALLY IN THEIR ORGANISATION, BUT MORE WORK IS NEEDED TO CONVINCE OTHERS TO DO THE SAME AND TO ALLOW LOCAL ORGANISATIONS TO WORK FREELY.**

### START FUND BANGLADESH PAVED THE WAY FOR CHANGE...

An unfortunate mindset still exists that local organisations are not capable of handling and making decisions around large sums of money. Most often, they are funded indirectly through INGOs where they feel that they are unduly controlled and not free to make the best decisions for the communities they serve. The direct funding of local organisations by Start Fund Bangladesh has gone some way in changing this mindset, but there is still more to be done to encourage others to do the same.

*There exists a disparity in the way INGOs are viewed versus the way national and local organisations are viewed. To ensure that local and national organisations are given equal opportunity in accessing funds to implement their projects and proposals perhaps we could have a fixed percentage of funds that will be allotted to such local and national organisations working in humanitarian response... To ensure the survival of these small local organisations at the grassroots level Start Fund Bangladesh and the Start Network must focus on localisation in its truest sense. INGOs must take a back seat and local organisations must be allotted the financial support as estimated in the Charter for Change.*

*The changes that are necessary in improving the impact of the Start Fund in Bangladesh is to enable local organisations to make decisions free from the influence of international partners and organisations. There is an inherent disparity and inequity in the capabilities and opportunities that INGOs possess against those which are available to local and national NGOs. We must keep this in mind and ensure that local and national organisations are not made to compete against INGOs for limited funding.*

*Most INGOs still do not believe that either local or national organisations are capable of operating efficiently and able to independently make decisions regarding the allotment and allocation of funds. They believe that they constantly need to supervise the activities of local NGOs. They think we do not have the skill, the capacity, or the know-how to function and make decisions independently... Start Fund has paved the way for a change in the mindset of INGOs and the belief that some local and national organisations are indeed worthy of receiving direct funding and are capable of implementing their project successfully by themselves...*

*Those of us who are in the category of national organisations often feel that our decisions are controlled by international organisations. [They] feel that they are more capable, mature, and experienced to direct operations than national organisations, as they possess greater financial capabilities, human resources, or have better systems in place than us. ... national organisations are usually at the receiving end of the chain of command, they begin to doubt their own capabilities and it takes us a while to build up a culture of decision making... Start Fund has been able to remove or at least minimise the role of unnecessary intermediaries and provides funding directly to local partner organisations.*

### ...BUT NEED TO CONVINCE OTHERS TO FOLLOW THEIR EXAMPLE, TO FACILITATE DIRECT ACCESS TO FUNDING FOR LOCAL ORGANISATIONS...

The positive experience of working with Start Fund Bangladesh led the organisations to reflect that there should be other ways to facilitate direct funding of local organisations globally and nationally. It was suggested that a fixed percentage of funding could be set aside only for local organisations, and that local organisations should not be made to compete with large INGOs who have much more resources and opportunities available to them. They believe that INGOs should be taking a back seat to ensure not only the survival of smaller organisations but a better future humanitarian system of locally led action across the globe. This should be the focus of Start Network and the Start Funds, also ensuring they upskill smaller organisations so they can actively participate in the change that these local organisations have already been part of as a result of working with Start Fund Bangladesh.



# 3

## CHAMPION FOR CHANGE



### ...AND CREATE ROOM FOR THEM TO BE FREE TO ACT AND SPEAK OUT.

Local organisations also need to be supported in voicing their opinions and should not feel concerned about speaking out or going against the donors or INGOs they are working with. In the interest of the communities affected by crisis, decision-making needs to shift from these large INGOs to local organisations. Part of this shift can be facilitated by more direct funding to local organisations, but there is also a need to “create room for local and national organisations to operate free from the influence of INGOs, and allow them greater autonomy and flexibility in the decision making process.”

*Local organisations in certain cases are still hesitant to put forward their opinions and decisions, because we live in the constant fear of alienating our funders and donors by taking decisions which may differ from their established methods of functioning. ... We must come out of this and move towards greater decision making by local organisations which will in turn create a greater impact on the aid and support that we can make available... We must create room to nurture the best practices and ideas of local and national members, such that they can operate free from the influence of INGOs*

These three lessons to be more inclusive to be more effective, upskill to empower, and champion for change were put to the Head of Start Fund Bangladesh, Sajid Raihan. His major reflection was that we need a mindset change to break this culture of silence and really listen to understand. He proposes five enabling factors behind the evolution of Start Fund Bangladesh that can help champion for this change and ensure the organisation really “walks the talk” (see Box).

*The process of localisation is a pedagogy of the oppressed. It is very important that members break the culture of silence, raise these questions more often and have expectations that Start as a platform can collectively address these issues. The solutions could be difficult and costly - as we all (including me) must least occupy the spaces and power - so that communities can seize their deserved spaces and exercise the power they possess.*

*The current dichotomy to portray conflicting difference between NGOs and INGOs is too linear; and seems intentional to detract from the wider dominances of institutional donors and UN agencies. INGO country offices in the South could be colonised too. We (including me) need to decolonise our mindset, and to critically discover the relationship between INGOS, LNGOs and communities – so to shift power from intermediaries to communities.*

*Change can be chaotic and disruptive. To champion for change – we need to change ourselves first, as precondition to our renewed political will and organisational commitments towards localisation. To walk the talk, we need an evolution of the platform – to be truly informed and represented by communities and frontline actors.*

**SAJID RAIHAN, HEAD OF START FUND BANGLADESH, START NETWORK**

# THE ENABLING FACTORS BEHIND THE EVOLUTION OF THE START FUND BANGLADESH

BY SAJID RAIHAN, HEAD OF START FUND BANGLADESH, START NETWORK



**Accountability to affected communities:** We have accountability tools practised by members. What we don't yet have is an independent mechanism (independent of service providers) that can take us beyond techno-managerial approaches to accountability and begin instead reshaping the power and incentivising structures that influence the participation revolution.



**Protect the civil society space:** We will continue to facilitate an enabling civil-society space to protect aid decision-making from undue (state/donor) influences; and maintain a strategic relationship with the government, so that we complement government's efforts to humanitarian crisis at local and national level, without compromising the quality of interventions. Expectation management is a big challenge where the Secretariat must perform a delicate interplay among multiple entities and interests - built on collectiveness, trust and respect. Members need to play a more influencing role here to protect their space, by nurturing and honing a united platform for collective interest.



**Diversify programmes and reduce single donor dependency:** We are diversifying our programme portfolio and expanding to areas such as disaster risk financing, organisational system strengthening initiatives for LNGOs and channelling more resources to locally rooted NGOs. Alongside Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) as our biggest donor, we now have Trusts and Philanthropies such as the Margaret and Cargill Philanthropies, the Shared Trust, and Swiss Development Cooperation.



**Reduce dependency on a hosting agency:** The host agency has its own policies and procedures which might not always have enough flexibility to address all the requirements from member agencies. It is widely perceived that an independent, registered entity of the platform would be much owned by members, more inclusive and respectful to their requirements. Start Fund Bangladesh is currently exploring the possible routes to become a registered entity. This is not yet a tested alternative though, as it might come with its own limitations that could have slowed down the evolution.



**Transition towards a more locally led mechanism:** We will onboard more local NGOs in coming years which will further strengthen the voices of frontline actors and communities. The members especially the local and national NGOs, have an aspiration to become a locally led hub at country-level, with more autonomy and authority at local level.

The three lessons are also relevant to the Start Network as an entity and are highly aligned with its vision of a future of locally led humanitarian action accountable to people affected by crisis. They build on our proposed outcomes of (1) A network of networks (where decision making lies in the hands of local actors) (2) A family of funds (where local organisations can access direct funding) and (3) A culture of innovation and learning (where shared learning can help find solutions to locally identified problems).

<https://startnetwork.org/resource/annual-report-2020-en>



## SINA CHOWDHURY POPI

(PEOPLE'S ORIENTATED PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION)

**W**hen working with most other international organisations and funders, we often find that the humanitarian response is so delayed that it comes much after the crisis or emergency situation has ended. However, Start requires that the response is conducted in a timely and efficient manner.

The most vulnerable and downtrodden, those who were completely overlooked and left unattended are now receiving some relief and aid, and we are able to reach such people because of Start Network. This is such an immense and unparalleled achievement and source for tremendous inspiration. Start Network never thinks a crisis or emergency situation is too small or too insignificant for it to merit or warrant humanitarian response.

“ **EVEN PRIOR TO START FUND BANGLADESH, SEVERAL OTHER NATIONAL LEVEL PLATFORMS AND CONSORTIUMS HAVE EXISTED.”**

“ **WHILE THESE CONSORTIUMS SEEK TO LIAISE WITH LOCAL AND CENTRAL GOVERNMENT, BRING TOGETHER VARIOUS ORGANISATIONS, AND CREATE AN EFFECTIVE PLATFORM TO COORDINATE DISASTER PREPAREDNESS EFFORTS, I CANNOT SAY WITH SURETY THAT THEY HAVE MADE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT.”**

Contrasting the Start Fund Bangladesh with this, we can clearly see that even when the government is contemplating policies to address disaster relief and preparedness, they are empanelling the Start Fund as a participant, and taking into account its views and suggestions. Whenever there is any discussion or deliberation on issues of disaster preparedness and emergency response, the voice of the Start Fund cannot be ignored.

There is a constant chain of communication to facilitate consultations and deliberations among member organisations of the Start Network and smaller community-based organisations, which allows us to coordinate our efforts. This allows all actors in the domain of disaster response to be brought under the broader umbrella of Start in some way, shape or form and allows us to coordinate our efforts to the best of our abilities.

Our experience working with Start Network is different from our experience working with most other international or even governmental donors and agencies where the decision-making process is entirely controlled by the funder and leaves the implementing partner with little to no autonomy or flexibility in the modes and methods of response that they will adopt.

Start Network gives partner organisations the freedom to raise an alert regarding a crisis or emergency situation, decide whether it warrants emergency response, determine the best course of action and the modes and methods of response. There is no hard lined directive that is issued from the top that we are restricted by or bound to follow.

A problem that often plagues the humanitarian sector in Bangladesh is that projects and programmes are forced upon local organisations, and they are bound to implement the programmes designed and structured by the donor, regardless of whether it is in sync with the needs and expectations of the targeted community, or the exigencies of a particular situation. Since we are a non-profit organisation, we do not have the kind of surplus funds that are required for us to initiate or implement a project of our own accord without any external funding. This has made us almost wholly reliant on external funding and has often allowed international organisations to exploit us. Most of our projects are donor based, and in most cases the donor provides us with a



'prescription' of what to do and how to do it. This forces us to cast aside our own expertise and skills and hinders our freedom and ability in designing the course of implementation of the project.

Through our interaction with the Start Network, we have found an avenue where we have the freedom to make decisions and design the project and adopt the best course of action as per our expertise and capabilities... While Start has created and provided us with a platform that facilitates and encourages the exchange of ideas and experiences, facilitates discussions and deliberations among various humanitarian actors across the country and even the world, I think that Start has a lot more potential in bringing governmental agencies and institutions within its fold to facilitate conversations between humanitarian actors from the civil society and their counterpart governmental institutions. This would ensure that humanitarian actors and governmental institutions are able to coordinate their efforts and prevent overlap in emergency responses, which would allow us to spread our limited resources and manpower across a larger area to be able to provide aid and relief to more people affected by crisis. Start Network also does not really play a role in liaising with local governments at the district level and this is something we could consider.

I have been working in the humanitarian sector with various organisations for the last 17-18 years and have been a part of several different consortiums working on disaster preparedness and emergency response. In all my experience, the kind of platform that the Start Fund Bangladesh has been able to create to facilitate an exchange of ideas and experiences and bring together an exceptionally diverse range of actors, individuals and organisations is unmatched. More or less all of the capable organisations working in Bangladesh in effectively implementing and ensuring timely humanitarian response in situations of emergency or crisis, are members of Start Fund Bangladesh and Start Network. We are able to learn and adopt the best practices from one and another, learn from failures and successes in field work and collectively formulate and deliberate on project designs and solutions to common issues.

In our relief and response efforts, we are often required to tackle the influence of the local government or antisocial elements that operate in the regions, before we are able to reach the people affected by crisis. Tackling these vested interest groups and their demands is vital for us to ensure that the aid reaches those who are truly vulnerable, rather than being diverted to corrupt channels. At our discussions we see that several actors have all faced similar situations and have adopted a variety of practices to address and overcome them. This sharing of a wealth of experiences is truly invaluable and gives us several potential avenues to address an issue.

We understand the issues and the crisis faced by the people of this region better than most other. We have also pioneered several successful models to ensure disaster preparedness for this region and have shared our learning with the Network, which have been very well received.

Start Network's greatest asset and its primary source of potential lies within its educated, knowledgeable, aware, and experienced members. I believe that the entire scope of impact is based in the hands of the members of the Network. Hence, it is only when the Network consists of capable, knowledgeable and experienced members, that the Network will be able to find effective solutions, duly implement them and create an impact on the lives of vulnerable populations. To ensure that we are able to have a positive and desirable impact on the humanitarian sector, the first and most urgent step is for us to ensure that members possess the skills, knowledge and capacities to effectuate the change that we want to see.

“**START COULD IMPLEMENT A SCHEME TO ACTIVELY WORK ON UPSKILLING AND CAPACITATING SMALLER ORGANISATIONS, WHICH WOULD ENABLE THESE LOCAL ORGANISATIONS TO PLAY A MORE ACTIVE ROLE IN THE DECISION MAKING PROCESS.**”

Those of us who are in the category of national organisations often feel that our decisions are controlled by international organisations. Usually international organisations feel that they are more capable, mature, and experienced to direct operations than national organisations, as they possess greater financial capabilities, human resources, or have better systems in place than us. National organisations are constantly trying to better their systems and procedures and have been putting in endless amounts of effort to come up. Due to the disparities in capacities and funding, when it comes to decision making it is often unreasonable for donors to expect that national organisations will be able to take the same kind of bold and innovative actions that international organisations are able to take. Hence, national organisations are usually at the receiving end of the chain of command, they begin to doubt their own capabilities and it takes us a while to build up a culture of decision making. In terms of their ability to make decisions, national organisations have not been given the due space, and as a result they are now shaky in their beliefs in their own abilities.

The Start Fund has made a big impact in providing funding directly to national and local organisations, and this is something that we can see happening. Start Fund has been able to remove or at least minimise the role of unnecessary intermediaries and provides funding directly to local partner organisations.

I think that we need a concerted effort to equip local and national organisations in decision making, and give them greater responsibility in this regard. Local organisations in certain cases are still hesitant to put forward their opinions and decisions, because we live in the constant fear of alienating our funders and donors by taking decisions which may differ from their established methods of functioning.

We must come out of this and move towards greater decision making by local organisations which will in turn create a greater impact on the aid and support that we can make available to our beneficiaries. Local organisations should be motivated and given greater flexibility and freedom in terms of decision making, and this process can be facilitated by Start.

“ WE FIND THAT THE SAME ORGANISATIONS OR INDIVIDUALS ARE RECURRINGLY RECEIVING GRANTS AND AWARDS, WHICH LEAVES OTHERS FEELING DESPONDENT AND NEGLECTED.”

“ WE SEE SOME INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANISATIONS EXERTING THEIR UNDUE INFLUENCE.”

This is not a failing of the Secretariat, but we see the sector having some dominant players which are most often INGOs and as I had said, it becomes difficult for national and local organisations which may be working on other commitments with these INGOs to openly challenge them or contest against them... there is a need to lessen the dominance of the Secretariat, and create room for local and national organisation to operate free from the influence of INGOs, and allow them greater autonomy and flexibility in the decision making process. We must move towards a balance of powers, and keep in mind the capacities and 'interests' of the members allotting funds and awards. This also necessitates greater upskilling and capacity building among member organisations, which will in turn ensure greater impact. We must create room to nurture the best practices and ideas of local and national members, such that they can operate free from the influence of INGOs



## SIRAJUL ISLAM AVAS

(ASSOCIATION OF VOLUNTARY ACTIONS FOR SOCIETY)

It was previously unforeseen and unimaginable for us working in the humanitarian response sector in Bangladesh, that within 72 hours of a crisis or emergency, it was possible to provide aid to the affected people and actively engage in humanitarian response. Given the bureaucracy and the delay that all our endeavours in humanitarian response are usually plagued by, in the early days of our association with the Start Network we were amazed at how quickly they were able to take into account our proposals and equip us to implement the necessary programs at the field level.

The Start Network and Start Fund Bangladesh are the only organisations that operate extremely swiftly and efficiently in providing humanitarian aid, and emergency relief to the vulnerable. What the Start Network has been able to achieve in its operations in Bangladesh has been nothing short of a miracle.

If it was not for Start Network, the position of some of the most vulnerable communities in Bangladesh would have further deteriorated. Start Network and Start Fund Bangladesh works with those communities that are often ignored by the government and other international organisations.

The biggest achievements of the Start Network in Bangladesh have been fourfold: firstly it has addressed the issue of localisation, secondly it has assisted in capacity building of local organisations, thirdly it has been able to provide funds directly to local organisations without any intermediaries, and lastly it has been able to address issues of sustainability in the practices of local organisations. This has had a tremendous impact on the local humanitarian actors working at the ground level in Bangladesh.

Prior to working with Start Fund, various local organisations working in the same area or on the same issues, including ours, attempted to coordinate with one another, to ensure efficient and effective delivery of humanitarian aid at the grassroots level. However, working with Start Fund Bangladesh has allowed us to strengthen the consortium of local organisations, and we are able to work together in the formulation of project proposals, and deliberate on the best course of action for its implementation.

Through the Start Network and Start Fund we have also been able to liaise and establish relations and networks with different governmental organisations and bodies. Through this association the Bangladesh government has also been encouraged to consider alternative and effective modes of humanitarian response. For instance, previously the Bangladesh government was hesitant about giving aid in cash to disaster affected people. Seeing the success of local organisations in providing cash transfers to the vulnerable population the government has followed suit. The government has also learned to prioritise the unique and specific needs of local vulnerable populations in its humanitarian response rather than implementing a one size fits all approach.

If the Start Fund could enlist and involve more local and national organisations in its membership and functioning, then its reach could be expanded significantly to every region and district of Bangladesh. If Start Fund Bangladesh took it upon itself to capacitate a greater number of local and national organisations then it could ensure that in any situation of crisis or emergency in any corner of Bangladesh, an effective and efficient humanitarian response would be possible.

“THE START NETWORK IS THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATION WORKING IN BANGLADESH TO START A CONVERSATION AROUND INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN STANDARDS, BEST PRACTICES, CODE OF CONDUCT.”

**“ WE HAVE LEARNT THE SKILLS REQUIRED TO ENGAGE IN EFFECTIVE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND BEEN ABLE TO ADDRESS THE GAPS IN OUR PROCEDURE AND FUNCTIONING.”**

Prior to our membership of Start Fund Bangladesh, they carried out an assessment of our organisational capacity, strengths and weaknesses. On the basis of this assessment Start Network has been able to discern our weaknesses and help us address them...Following our association with the Start Network not only have we reformed our internal policy procedures, but also our methods in fieldwork to ensure that they align with the international humanitarian standards and prioritise the needs of the affected population, involve them in the response process, and obtain their express consent at every step of the way.

Even when we photograph a member of the crisis affected and vulnerable community, we ensure that we obtain their express consent and that we do not dehumanise them in the course of representation. In designing our response in a crisis situation, we keep in mind the needs and concerns identified by the vulnerable community and attempt to take a bottom-up approach. Working in line with these humanitarian standards, principles and the code of conduct, we attempt to identify problems locally and employ problem-solving methods that are available to us. Furthermore, prior to our association with the Start Network, we would not pay as much attention to obtaining feedback about the project or proposal. Nowadays we are actively engaged in obtaining feedback about our projects and the methods we employ in humanitarian response.

**“ THE START NETWORK MAINTAINS THAT IT DOES NOT ENGAGE IN ACTIVELY MONITORING ITS PARTNER ORGANISATIONS. HOWEVER, IN MY OPINION IT IS VITAL THAT WE ENSURE ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY IN THE FUNCTIONING OF PARTNER ORGANISATIONS WHO HAVE BEEN ALLOTTED FUNDS TO IMPLEMENT PROJECTS AND UNDERTAKE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE.”**

The importance given by the Start Network in creating a consortium of local organisations, and its commitment to directly provide funding to the local organisations is what is most inspiring for us. Working as part of the consortium helps us identify local problems and the best responses for them, in an accurate and efficient manner. We feel greatly inspired that as local organisations we have been able to come together and adequately address a situation, through the consortium.

The consortium of local and national organisations that the Start Fund Bangladesh and Start Network have facilitated, has in turn led to greater knowledge learning and sharing between the partner organisations. We are able to better coordinate our response to emergency and crisis situations. We are able to learn from each other's successes and failures in field work, policy formulation, and project design.

Start Fund Bangladesh always values the opinions that the consortium puts forward and has given us the platform and freedom to determine the nature and scope of our activities on the field.

In working with us, the Start Network has been able to gain an insight into the issues that prevail at the ground level and estimate the needs of the most vulnerable and affected population of this region. They have come to realise that if local organisations are adequately supported and enabled by international organisations, they are able to do great work in providing relief and aid to the affected communities.

**“ THIS IS AN IMPORTANT LESSON NOT JUST FOR THE START NETWORK, BUT FOR THE INTERNATIONAL DONOR SECTOR AS WELL.”**

Start Network is the first international organisation of such calibre to work on the issue of localisation in Bangladesh. In this process of localisation, Start Network has worked closely with the local humanitarian actors and aided in the capacity building of local humanitarian

NGOs. The uniqueness in the work of Start Network lies in the fact that they are able to directly provide funds to the local humanitarian actors without having any middlemen or intermediaries between them. Upon directly receiving the funds from Start Network the local humanitarian actors are able to swiftly move towards implementation at the ground level.

“ **THE START NETWORK AND START FUND HAVE ALSO HELPED US ADDRESS ISSUES OF SUSTAINABILITY IN OUR ORGANISATION. THE OVERHEAD COSTS THAT THEY GIVE US, HELPS US TO ADDRESS THE WEAKNESSES IN OUR ORGANISATION.”**

Most INGOs still do not believe that either local or national organisations are capable of operating efficiently and able to independently make decisions regarding the allotment and allocation of funds. They believe that they constantly need to supervise the activities of local NGOs. They think we do not have the skill, the capacity, or the know-how to function and make decisions independently. Though these INGOs claim that they are working alongside, in reality they are constantly making all the decisions for us and attempting to control our actions. We are very grateful for the fact that it is because of Start Fund Bangladesh that our organisation is able to receive direct funding. Start Fund has paved the way for a change in the mindset of INGOs and the belief that some local and national organisations are indeed worthy of receiving direct funding and are capable of implementing their project successfully by themselves.

There exists a disparity in the way INGOs are viewed versus the way national and local organisations are viewed. To ensure that local and national organisations are given equal opportunity in accessing funds to implement their projects and proposals perhaps we could have a fixed percentage of funds that will be allotted to such local and national organisations working in humanitarian response.

Local and national organisations in Bangladesh are equipped and have the necessary skills to be able to function alone in humanitarian response. They no longer need to be supervised by INGOs in the discharge of their functions, and have sufficient capabilities to be trusted with a greater degree of responsibility and independence.

To ensure the survival of these small local organisations at the grassroots level Start Fund Bangladesh and the Start Network must focus on localisation in its truest sense. INGOs must take a back seat and local organisations must be allotted the financial support as estimated in the Charter for Change. It is imperative that we establish localisation and advocate for local organisations to be given the financial support as promised by these documents and charters.



## ABOUT START NETWORK

Start Network is made up of more than 50 aid agencies across five continents, ranging from large international organisations to national NGOs. Together, our aim is to transform humanitarian action through innovation, fast funding, early action, and localisation.

We're tackling what we believe are the biggest systemic problems that the sector faces problems including slow and reactive funding, centralised decision-making, and an aversion to change, means that people affected by crises around the world, do not receive the best help fast enough, and needless suffering results.

Visit our website to see a full list of members.

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

[@startnetwork](https://twitter.com/startnetwork)

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