



HPG Report

Dignity and humanitarian action in displacement

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Acronyms

| | |
|--------------|--|
| AAP | Accountability to Affected People |
| APRRN | Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network |
| ARSA | Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army |
| CDAC | Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities |
| CSCEA | Common Service for Community Engagement and Accountability |
| CwC | Communicating with Communities |
| DRC | Danish Refugee Council |
| FGD | focus group discussion |
| ICRC | International Committee of the Red Cross |
| IDP | internally displaced person |
| INGO | international non-governmental organisation |
| NGO | non-governmental organisation |
| PSEA | protection from sexual exploitation and abuse |
| SGBV | sexual and gender-based violence |
| UN | United Nations |
| UNHCR | UN High Commissioner for Refugees |
| WASH | water, sanitation and hygiene |
| WHS | World Humanitarian Summit |

Executive summary

Dignity is a frequently invoked concept in humanitarian action and human rights. Yet, despite its widespread appearance in humanitarian policy and programme documents, advocacy campaigns and donor requirements, it remains a word with positive connotations but little agreement as to what it exactly entails. Without a clear agreement on what dignity means, it is difficult to know whether a response will uphold or undermine someone's dignity.

This report draws on the findings of a two-year HPG research project on 'Dignity in displacement: from rhetoric to reality'. The goal of the project was not to define dignity, but to understand what it meant to affected people in different places, with different cultures and at different times. It explores how refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs) and returnees in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Colombia, Lebanon, the Philippines and South Sudan understand dignity, and whether (and how) they feel that their dignity has been upheld in displacement. It then compares their understanding with that of humanitarian workers in these responses, analysing what this means for humanitarian policy, programme design and implementation more broadly, and the localisation agenda more specifically. One of the questions that this project sought to answer was whether a more local response would be a more dignified response.

Although each case study focused on displacement, the root causes of that displacement, and the circumstances of the people affected by it, differed between them. The research found that the situation from which people fled (conflict, persecution or disaster), the location to which they fled (the relationship between the country of origin and the host country, or if they remained internally displaced) and the length of displacement all played large roles in the extent to which a response was experienced as dignified.

Two of the main themes commonly articulated across the case studies in this project were respect and self-reliance. It was also linked to religious practice (for Rohingya and returnees and IDPs in Afghanistan), rights (for Syrians in Lebanon), justice (for IDPs in Colombia) and honour (for IDPs in

the Philippines). While the Rohingya we spoke to expressed dignity as a social concept, Syrians saw it more as individual, while in the Philippines study it was expressed equally as both. Few differences in conceptualisation were apparent between genders and ages.

When asked what dignity means in a humanitarian response, interviewees placed more emphasis on *how* aid was given, rather than *what* was given. The main components of a dignified response included transparency, clear targeting and face-to-face communication. Cash-based aid was seen as more dignified, but only if it was delivered in a dignified way. The substance of aid became an issue of dignity only when it was deemed culturally insensitive or inappropriate.

Humanitarians spoke about dignity as rights and protection, respect and communication, agency and independence and, in acute emergency settings, meeting basic needs. Where these concepts overlapped with the conceptualisations of dignity held by the affected population, we expected that the response would be judged more dignified, and vice versa, but this was not necessarily the case. In Bangladesh, for example, understandings of dignity differed between the Rohingya and humanitarian actors, but the Rohingya felt the response was dignified. The reverse was true in Lebanon: humanitarian actors conceptualised dignity in a similar way to Syrians, but the response was still felt to be undignified. The initial hypothesis that more locally led responses would be more dignified was also not proven based on this research. Communities did not care who gave them aid so long as it was given in a dignified way, and their complaints were directed more at individuals working in both local and international organisations rather than at the organisations themselves.

This study suggests six recommendations for incorporating dignity into a humanitarian response:

- Invest time and resources in listening to the affected population from the start of the response, and use this information to inform project design and implementation.

- Use more face-to-face communication, especially in the assessment phase of the humanitarian response, and pay attention to what means of communication are appropriate at each stage.
- To better understand the local culture and language, include anthropologists, sociologists, translators and others in the response, who can help in understanding the affected population and the dynamics of their situation.
- Invest in programmes that promote self-reliance, where possible, and encourage more participation by affected communities in project design and implementation.
- Seek complementarity between local, national, regional and international actors to harness their strengths and reach better humanitarian outcomes that support the dignity of affected populations.
- Be more realistic about what humanitarians can and cannot do, and do not promise to uphold dignity. Rather, understand what it means in practice, in each context, and the limits of what can be done about it in the midst of a humanitarian response.

1 Introduction

Dignity is a frequently invoked concept in humanitarian action and human rights. The right to life with dignity constitutes the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNGA, 1948) and the first principle of the Sphere Project's *Humanitarian charter and minimum standards in disaster response* (2018). Recent international norms and agreements, such as the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, commit signatories to ensuring a 'people-centred, sensitive, humane, dignified, gender-responsive and prompt reception' for refugees and migrants (UNGA, 2016). Dignity has also been mentioned in debates around localisation, and there is an assumption that greater funding to local actors will in itself lead to a more dignified humanitarian response (for a clear example of this link, see Adeso, 2016).

Despite its frequent appearance in humanitarian policy and programme documents, advocacy campaigns and donor requirements, dignity remains a word with positive connotations but little agreement as to what it exactly entails. Without clear agreement on what dignity means, it is difficult to know whether a particular response has upheld or undermined someone's dignity. More specifically, unless the humanitarian community knows what dignity means to the people it aims to support, how can it ensure that its response is dignified?

This report draws on the findings of a two-year HPG research project on 'Dignity in displacement: from rhetoric to reality'. The goal of the project was not to define dignity, but to understand what it meant to affected people in different places, with different cultures and at different times. It explores how refugees, IDPs and returnees in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Colombia, Lebanon, the Philippines and South Sudan understand dignity, and whether (and how) they feel their dignity has been upheld in displacement. It then compares their understanding with that of humanitarian workers in these responses, and analyses what this means for humanitarian policy, programme design and implementation more broadly, and the localisation agenda more specifically. One of the key questions this project sought to answer was whether a more local response would be a more dignified response.

1.1 Methodology

The research questions guiding this project were as follows:

- How has the concept of dignity been understood within the humanitarian sector?
- How do displaced people and communities perceive dignity?
- How far, and in what ways, have international responses to displacement upheld dignity during programme design and implementation?
- How far, and in what ways, have locally led responses to displacement promoted dignity during programme implementation?
- What are the implications of the findings of this study for programme design and implementation?

To answer these questions, several individual pieces of work were undertaken, including a literature review (Holloway and Grandi, 2018), two in-depth case studies (Holloway and Fan, 2018; Grandi et al., 2018) and four smaller case studies (Holloway, 2019). These studies sought to understand dignity from the points of view of affected populations and humanitarian actors.

Over the six case studies, more than 340 individual interviews and 36 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with displaced people and aid staff involved in the humanitarian response, from United Nations (UN) agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and international, national and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (see Table 1). The local researchers who wrote the four shorter case studies conducted their interviews in person and via phone and email. ODI researchers involved in the two in-depth case studies conducted interviews and FGDs with the help of local research teams (see Box 1) – Bangladeshi researchers from Restless Beings and freelance Rohingya researchers in Bangladesh, and Lebanese and Syrian researchers from Sawa for Development and Aid and the Levantine Institute of Tripoli in Lebanon.

In each location, 'dignity' was translated into the local language by local researchers, and the corresponding terms – *wigar*, *haisi-yath* and *arzakhth* in Pashto (Afghanistan); *ijjot* in Rohingya (Bangladesh);

dignidad in Spanish (Colombia); *karama* in Arabic (Lebanon); *maratabat* and *pagadatan* in M'ranao (the Philippines) and *twöit* and *kuga ba 'borik* in Kuku (South Sudan) – were used to analyse what the target populations meant by 'dignity'. In Bangladesh, there are two main words used in the Rohingya language – *maan-shomman* and *ijjot*. These words were confirmed with our local Rohingya research partners and Translators without Borders and tested during the piloting of the interview questions. Both were used during the interviews, though *ijjot* appeared more frequently because it is derived from Arabic (the language of Islam), whereas *maan-shomman* comes from Sanskrit (the language of Buddhism). In Lebanon, questions were piloted using the Arabic word for dignity, *karama* (كرامة), as suggested by the Syrian research partner, but other terms used by interviewees were noted and used in the analysis, including *al-e'htheram* (الاحترام), *al-hokouk* (الحقوق), *al-sharaf* (الشرف), *al-onfwan* (العنفوان), *al-isteklaliyya* (الاستقلالية), *al-fakhr* (الفخر), *al-e'temad 'ala al-nafs* (الاعتماد على النفس), *tahqeeq al-dhat* (تحقيق الذات) and *qeemet al-dhat* (قيمة الذات), which translate as respect,

rights, honour, pride with strength, independence, pride, self-reliance, self-realisation and self-worth, respectively. For the four smaller case studies in Afghanistan, Colombia, the Philippines and South Sudan, the authors were part of the communities about which they were writing, and they chose the appropriate word and synonyms.¹

1.2 Outline of the report

This report is structured as follows. Chapter 2 offers a brief overview of the displacement contexts of the case studies, with a particular focus on the two in-depth studies on the Rohingya in Bangladesh and Syrians in Lebanon. Chapter 3 examines the main findings. Chapter 4 considers dignity from the point of view of humanitarian actors, and discusses key points where it is both similar to and different from that of affected populations. It also considers what this means for locally led responses. Chapter 5 concludes the paper with key recommendations for policy and practice.

Table 1: Interviews by type and location

| Location | Displaced people | | Actors involved in the response |
|--------------|-----------------------|-----------|---------------------------------|
| | Individual interviews | FGDs | Individual interviews |
| Afghanistan | 6 | 3 | 2 |
| Bangladesh | 75 | 11 | 21 |
| Colombia | 6 | 4 | 5 |
| Lebanon | 59 | 14 | 39 |
| Philippines | 76 | 0 | 33 |
| South Sudan | 25 | 4 | 0 |
| Total | 247 | 36 | 100 |

Box 1: Why local research teams were used

This project is part of a two-year research agenda called 'From the ground up: understanding local response in crises', which seeks to understand the complexities and dynamics of locally led humanitarian responses. As part of this process, HPG used and learnt from local partners in our research projects, to bring us closer to the topic. Because this study

on dignity hinges on the definition and nuances of a single term, local researcher partners fluent in the languages of affected people were key. Interviews were conducted in interviewees' native languages, removing language barriers and creating a more personal and natural environment in which to discuss such a sensitive topic.

¹ More information on the language used can be found in the methodology section of each case study.

2 Overview of the case studies

Although each case study focused on displacement, the root causes of that displacement, and the circumstances of the people affected by it, differed between them (see Table 2). The research found that the situation from which people fled (conflict, persecution or disaster), the location to which they fled (the relationship between the country of origin and the host country, or if they remained internally displaced) and the length of displacement all played large roles in the extent to which a response was experienced as dignified.

2.1 Rohingya in Bangladesh

The Rohingya have a politically charged and widely debated history in Myanmar, stemming from the ninth century when Arab traders arrived in present-day Rakhine State on their way to China (Uddin, 2015). Since Myanmar gained independence in 1948, the government has systematically stripped the Rohingya of their citizenship rights and created a public narrative that they do not belong in Myanmar, but rather in Bangladesh (Ullah, 2011; Farzana, 2015; Haque, 2017).

Military operations against the Rohingya since the late 1970s have spurred three main waves of displacement to Bangladesh, in 1977–78, 1991–92 and 2017. In 1977–78, approximately 300,000 Rohingya fled violence to Bangladesh, only to return, labelled as ‘foreigners’ and ‘illegal immigrants’, in 1979. In 1982 the Rohingya were denied citizenship in Myanmar and became stateless (Farzana, 2015; Haque, 2017; Kyaw, 2017). In 1991–92, around 270,000 Rohingya fled a campaign of forced labour and rape following a failed democratic election in 1990. Between 1993 and 1997,

roughly 230,000 returned to Myanmar. Those who stayed in Bangladesh were housed in two camps for registered refugees, where aid was allowed, and several other camps for unregistered refugees, where aid was not officially sanctioned (Farzana, 2017).

Displacement continued throughout the 2010s until, on 24 August 2017, approximately 687,000 Rohingya fled an army campaign of murder and rape following the publication of a peace-building report by the Kofi Annan-led Advisory Commission on Rakhine State and a round of attacks on the army by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA). As such, the displacement of the Rohingya is both protracted and acute; the length of time spent in camps in Bangladesh and the level of access to aid – based largely on status as a registered refugee in one of the two official camps prior to the most recent influx – determine how the Rohingya view themselves and their situation.

As of February 2018, at least 127 humanitarian organisations (13 local, 45 national and 69 international), 12 UN agencies and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement were active in the camps (ISCG, 2018). Although this large-scale humanitarian response has helped mitigate some of the problems faced by the Rohingya in Bangladesh, they remain stateless and are denied freedom of movement, the right to work and the right to be educated in Bangladesh, which is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention. When the fieldwork for this study was conducted, they still had no recognised identity documents or legal status. The view of the Government of Bangladesh is that the Rohingya are temporary migrants awaiting return to Myanmar (Uddin, 2015; Milton et al., 2017; Riley et al., 2017; ISCG, 2018).

Table 2: Research context

| Country | Cause of displacement | Refugee or IDP | Length of displacement |
|-------------|-----------------------|------------------|---|
| Afghanistan | War | IDP and returnee | Long-term |
| Bangladesh | Ethnic persecution | Refugee | Progressive waves: from 40 years to two years |
| Colombia | Internal conflict | IDP | Progressive waves: since mid-1980s |
| Lebanon | Internal war (Syria) | Refugee | c. eight years |
| Philippines | Siege and typhoon | IDP | Short-term |
| South Sudan | Internal war | Refugee | c. five years |

2.2 Syrians in Lebanon

Since the popular uprising and subsequent war in Syria began in 2011, approximately 1.5 million Syrians have fled to Lebanon, based on the two countries' common political and socioeconomic history, geographical proximity and close trade and family ties. Refugees generally stayed first with relatives, friends and business partners, before scattering throughout the country in urban settings and informal settlements (Rabil, 2016; Sanyal, 2017).

In January 2015, after allowing Syrians into the country for more than three years, the Government of Lebanon tightened restrictions on movement, access to work and legal status. The following May, the government asked the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to suspend new registrations (Amnesty International, 2015). Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and does not recognise Syrians as refugees or afford them rights as refugees. In 2017, almost three-quarters of Syrians in Lebanon lacked valid residency status, either because they were unable to obtain it initially or because they could not renew it due to complex bureaucracy, prohibitive paperwork and high fees or inconsistent application of policies around residency (Amnesty International, 2015; UNHCR et al., 2017; Ford and Lintelo, 2018).

More than three-quarters of Syrian households in Lebanon were living below the poverty line (\$3.84/person/day), making them eligible for cash assistance provided by UNHCR, but limited funding meant that only 17% actually received it (UNHCR et al., 2017; Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018: 39). Meanwhile, the predominantly urban nature of displacement in Lebanon has made it difficult for organisations to identify, locate and assist refugees, and the government's refusal to allow interventions that would encourage Syrians to stay permanently is a significant obstacle to sustainable interventions, including infrastructure and basic services (Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018).

2.3 Other research contexts

The four smaller case studies involved in this project were undertaken by local researchers in Afghanistan, Colombia, the Philippines and South Sudan. In Afghanistan, refugees, returnees and IDPs have been displaced in and around Jalalabad following waves of violence since 2001 (Kandiwal,

2019). According to the 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview, insecurity and a severe drought have left almost one in six Afghans requiring humanitarian assistance and protection. Approximately 700,000 people are internally displaced, and an additional 270,000 are classified as refugees or returnees. In Nangahar province, where Jalalabad is located, one in three is either an IDP or a returnee (OCHA, 2018a). Despite access difficulties, there is a well-established humanitarian presence, with 47 active humanitarian partners (OCHA, 2108b). More than 80% of the funding requirements set out in the UN humanitarian appeal for Afghanistan were met in 2018 (OCHA, 2108c).

In Colombia, the current phase of internal displacement began in the mid-1980s with violent confrontations between the government, left-wing insurgents and right-wing paramilitaries (illegal groups linked to the army) and violence associated with drug-trafficking.² Roughly 7.3 million people – almost 15% of the population – were internally displaced between 1985 and 2017. A peace agreement signed in 2016 raised hopes that displacement might end, but illegal armed groups have remained active (Ángel, 2019). There are 135 humanitarian organisations involved in the response in Colombia, with a target population of one million people out of a total in need of almost five million (OCHA, 2017).

The Philippines was second globally in terms of new internal displacements in 2017 thanks to displacement following the Marawi Siege (May–October) and Typhoon Tembin, known locally as Typhoon Vinta (December) (Fernandez, 2019). As of August 2018, more than 77,000 households remained displaced in 56 municipalities and three cities. More than 80% surveyed by UNHCR said that they had received assistance, including food, employment/livelihood support, water, sanitation and hygiene support, shelter, health and education, more than half of it provided by the government (UNHCR, 2018b). Only 23% of funding requirements for the Philippines were met in 2018 (OCHA, 2108c).

Refugees from South Sudan have been living in surrounding countries, including Uganda and Egypt, for decades due to civil war in Sudan (1955–1972, 1983–2005) and then in South Sudan after independence in 2011. Various peace processes have been attempted over the years, including the current agreement signed in Ethiopia on 12 September 2018, but to little avail (Moro, 2019). According to the 2019 Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2.2

2 This research focused on IDPs in Colombia and did not look at refugees from Venezuela.

million refugees from South Sudan are living in neighbouring countries and another two million are internally displaced. Of these, more than 785,000 are in Uganda, though this number is expected to surpass 1.1 million in 2019 due to continued violence and increasing food insecurity in South Sudan (OCHA, 2018e; UNHCR, 2018c). More

than 100 humanitarian organisations are involved in UNHCR's refugee response in Uganda, including national and international NGOs, UN agencies and development partners (UNHCR, 2018c). Only 38% of funding requirements for the South Sudan Regional Refugee Response Plan were covered in 2018 (OCHA, 2018c).

3 Displaced people's understanding of dignity

This chapter summarises the main findings from the six case studies undertaken for this project. It considers the cultural and contextual specificity of dignity in these six displacement settings; how dignity can be defined socially or individually; and whether it differs based on gender or age in each context. Finally, it suggests that, for affected people, dignity is often more about *how* aid is given, rather than *what* is given, though the substance of aid is important, particularly if it is culturally insensitive.

3.1 Dignity is culturally and contextually specific

As the literature review that began this project demonstrated, dignity has multiple meanings – including self-worth, self-respect and/or as a human right. It has also been subject to overuse and misuse in philosophy, legal thought, medical ethics, human rights and humanitarianism (Holloway and Grandi, 2018). Although present in numerous international documents and national constitutions, its meaning is rarely made explicit. Rather, as the fieldwork for this project suggests, dignity is an umbrella term that incorporates many different aspects of what communities value most. Two of the main themes that were commonly articulated across the case studies were respect and self-reliance, though there were also important differences in what dignity meant to people in different contexts and cultures.

3.1.1 Commonalities in conceptualisations of dignity across research contexts

Two main themes emerged in all six case studies: dignity as respect and dignity as self-reliance. Dignity as respect relates to how people are treated, and specifically whether they perceive themselves as being treated as individual human beings. The philosopher who most directly shaped how dignity is conceived in Western thought, Immanuel Kant, proposed that human beings have dignity because they are autonomous. Individuals should never be treated only as a means to an end, but always as an

end in themselves (Kant, 1785). Based on a Kantian interpretation of dignity, Oscar Schachter claimed that people's dignity, or intrinsic worth, should prevent them from being treated as instruments or objects of the will of others (Schachter, 1983).

In the case studies, this concept was most clearly seen in Colombia, where IDPs felt they were being instrumentalised by international non-governmental organisation (INGO) staff, whom they saw as making their living off the back of the misery of people who had been displaced. Because INGO staff have a different social status, are paid significantly more and display this wealth through their vehicles, clothes and equipment, many IDPs interviewed for this study felt they were being used as a means to an end, and that they must suffer in order for NGO staff to prosper. As one IDP put it: 'We live like this to make them eat well and stay in hotels'.

In other case studies, dignity as respect was less about instrumentalisation and more about common decency. For the Rohingya, dignity was overwhelmingly defined as mutual respect. Tangible manifestations of mutual respect included using polite speech and appropriate greetings. The desire for this type of respect extended outside of their community, to aid workers and others with whom they interacted. One man who had lived in Kutupalong for 10 years stated: 'When others are kind to us, we will reciprocate it. Even if they aren't, we will still be kind because we understand that they are giving us aid, and it's not always easy'. Several Rohingya spoke of disrespectful treatment, including being shouted at or even beaten with sticks while waiting in distribution queues. Similar stories of disrespectful behaviour by NGO and government employees involved in aid distributions were also common in Afghanistan.

For Syrians in Lebanon and South Sudanese in Uganda and Egypt, respect was linked to interactions with the host community more than humanitarian workers. Examples of humiliation and discrimination appeared in more than half of the interviews conducted with Syrians in Lebanon. In a focus group in Bar Elias,

one woman explained dignity as ‘respect and the absence of humiliation’; another claimed respect was so important to her dignity that she would ‘trade all of the luxuries of life for it’. Similarly, a man in Bar Elias described dignity as receiving respect in the same way as everyone else and without discrimination – respect that he had not received in Lebanon due to discrimination and views of Syrians as ‘underclass people’. An elderly man in Tripoli expressed a similar sentiment: ‘Respect is very important [for a dignified life]. Here, people sometimes make you feel like you don’t belong in this place, and it affects your dignity’. For South Sudanese, respect was the most common expression of dignity, and lack of respect from the host community was seen as undermining dignity. South Sudanese refugees related being faced with racism and xenophobia because of the colour of their skin, particularly in Egypt. This discrimination is occasionally accompanied by violence, which is ignored by the police. Displaced Syrians in Lebanon reported similar experiences.

The other common conceptualisation of dignity across the case studies was self-reliance – one aspect of the philosophical idea of dignity as agency. In the fifteenth century, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola linked dignity to autonomy and claimed that all human beings have the capacity to do what they choose and be what they want (Pico della Mirandola, 1486). Later philosophers including Kant built on this idea, theorising that treating people with dignity means treating them as autonomous individuals with the power to decide their own destiny. More recently, James Griffin has expanded on this idea by analysing dignity through the lens of people’s active agency (Griffin, 2008).

Self-reliance is a specific form of agency – that of providing for oneself and one’s family. In several case studies people mentioned other forms of agency; Colombian IDPs, for instance, saw dignity as the ability to decide their own future, and IDPs in the Philippines wanted to be actively involved in the reconstruction process. However, almost all displacement contexts related dignity to self-reliance. In Colombia, many of the men interviewed mentioned dignity in terms of employability and self-sufficiency, providing and making decisions for their families. In Afghanistan, several men stated that their dignity depended on their job and earning an income. For the Rohingya, self-reliance was important to both men and women. One man said that ‘working hard and earning your own livelihood is a big part of Rohingya identity and our idea of dignity’. A 35-year-old woman added: ‘If we got the chance to do something to work, it would be better for us so that we could

help ourselves’. However, the Rohingya are denied the right to work, and those who do are often employed in marginal and clandestine activities, illegally and for low wages. South Sudanese refugees in Uganda explained that one source of their dignity is hard work and enjoying the fruits of their labour and stressed that not having agricultural land allocated by the government meant they had to rely on others for survival, undermining their dignity.

Instead of terming it ‘self-reliance’, displaced Syrians in Lebanon felt that independence was necessary for a dignified life. This independence encompasses many different aspects of agency, including personal and economic empowerment, the ability to choose and shape their lives, the possibility of self-realisation and the opportunity to provide for themselves and their families. Syrians are restricted to three occupations, agriculture, construction and cleaning. Barred from working as lawyers, engineers, teachers and doctors, as they had done in Syria, interviewees felt that their skills were going to waste, while others accepted any work they could find. As one man in Tripoli stated: ‘The economic situation is also extremely important for dignity. I hate asking my friends and family for support. It has a negative impact on my dignity. I always privilege work above anything else to protect my dignity’. Similar links have been made by UNHCR’s Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, which describes self-reliance as ‘the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet essential needs ... in a sustainable manner and with dignity’ (De Vriese, 2006: 2). Likewise, the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) (2014) argues that dignity is ensured when people attain self-sufficiency.

While respect corresponds easily with the principle of humanity that underpins the humanitarian enterprise, the importance that all the case studies placed on self-reliance for the concept of dignity raises difficult questions. Because humanitarian aid is by definition provided at precisely the point when people in crises are unable to provide for themselves, it is almost inevitable that it is given in situations where they are struggling to live dignified lives. The mere fact of receiving emergency relief can have negative as well as positive effects – giving recipients back some dignity, while simultaneously reminding them of their dependency and lack of dignity. In Bangladesh, many Rohingya explained that the point where they felt most and least dignified was one and the same: when they crossed the border and were met with hospitality and assistance from local Bangladeshis and NGOs. At that moment they felt most dignified because someone had recognised their struggle and provided them with

help they desperately needed. But they also felt least dignified because that was the moment they realised they were no longer self-sufficient and could not take care of their families on their own.

3.1.2 Differences in conceptualisations of dignity across displacement contexts

Beyond respect and self-reliance, conceptualisations of dignity differed among the various displacement contexts. For the Rohingya in Bangladesh, dignity also encompassed religious practice, particularly relating to purdah for women. The same was true of returnees and IDPs in Afghanistan. In both of these contexts, purdah takes two forms: the covering of women's bodies from the view of men who are not family members and gender segregation, often achieved by women remaining in the home for much of the day. For Rohingya interviewees, purdah was often described in terms of privacy and choice, or 'not being forced to leave the house', or 'not leaving the house unnecessarily', as well as the choice, or freedom, to wear a hijab or burka outside the home (see also Ripoll, 2017). Religious persecution was a driving force behind their displacement from Myanmar. When women mentioned dignity as the freedom to wear the veil, some connected this with occasions when they had been forced to remove it at checkpoints or when applying for a marriage licence in Myanmar. Similarly, when discussing repatriation, many Rohingya mentioned not wanting to return home because they would receive a Muslim burial if they stayed in Bangladesh – a religious custom they would be denied in Myanmar.

For Syrians in Lebanon, dignity included rights; as a 26-year-old woman in the Bekaa Valley stated: 'When it comes to dignity, it is all about rights'. To live in Lebanon legally, Syrians are required to have a Lebanese sponsor, usually their employer, whom they must pay to obtain a residency permit. Without this permit, many Syrians live in the country irregularly, as what they term 'de facto second-class citizens'. The lack of freedom of movement and fear of security checkpoints, particularly for those living irregularly, have been well documented (Andres-Vinas et al., 2015; Howe, 2016; NRC, 2016; UNHCR et al., 2017; Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018). Syrians also do not have the right to access healthcare or education in the same way as Lebanese nationals – services that were free in Syria, but highly privatised in Lebanon. Thus, many suggested their dignity would only be protected when they obtained the same rights as Lebanese citizens. As with religion and the Rohingya, this conceptualisation of dignity as rights is closely tied to their past and current experience and their loss of rights in displacement.

For IDPs in Colombia, dignity included justice, or being able to claim IDP status and receive the rights due to them. In 1997, the government began to recognise forcibly displaced people as IDPs, and only people who have this status are able to receive humanitarian assistance provided by the government. Yet this label also brings with it discrimination, as there is a strong belief that people who are internally displaced must have brought it upon themselves. Thus, dignity is also about truth, or 'calling things by their true name'. IDPs who return to their place of origin with government assistance are given 'letters of dignity' that recognise their resilience as survivors and that they had been affected by armed conflict. This letter is considered insufficient by many IDPs because it does little to address discrimination in practice and does not make up for the indignities they suffered while displaced.

For IDPs in the Philippines dignity was also about honour and pride. Helping family members is a matter of honour, and IDPs are almost always housed with relatives; only the most destitute, or those without family to take them in, live in collective shelters. Pride is also cited as the reason why many in need of assistance refuse to queue for relief, despite the fact that people left their homes in Marawi thinking they would only be gone a few days and did not take enough provisions with them.

3.2 Individual, social, gendered and age-differentiated dignity

One of the findings illuminated by the literature review was that dignity has both individual and social aspects. Individually, dignity relates to one's inner mental and emotional sphere, or how one sees oneself. Socially, dignity is outward and collective, relating to a person's social and relational identity, or how others perceive that person. Depending on the circumstances or cultural context, these two aspects may coexist equally or, more likely, one takes precedence over the other (Holloway and Grandi, 2018).

3.2.1 Social and individual dignity

For Rohingya interviewees, dignity is overwhelmingly social and collective – communal or familial – and rooted in mutual respect. As one community leader explained: 'In my culture, dignity is possible when we all have dignity as a community'. When discussing mutual respect, respect for others was often articulated first. According to a 39-year-old man, dignity is 'treating people with respect and being treated with

respect ... living respectfully with my community and getting respect back'. Similarly, a 35-year-old woman remarked: 'Everything we do for each other is related to dignity'. One possible interpretation of the social aspects of dignity expressed by the Rohingya is that, unlike the other refugee situations included in this study, they were persecuted on the basis of their collective identity.

In Lebanon, Syrian interviewees occasionally explained dignity as a social concept, but more often it was used individually. This was apparent in the many stories they told about lacking rights and feeling disrespected when dealing with the government and their Lebanese employers, landlords and neighbours. Social, or collective, dignity appeared most often in discussions of stereotypes of Syrian refugees. As a female humanitarian worker in her fifties put it: 'When any taxi driver tells me that I do not look like a Syrian, I feel humiliated by that ... It is an insult to have stereotypes about Syrians that we are all backward and all dress the same'.

In the Philippines, dignity is equally individual and social. Personal dignity relates to pride and physical living standards, safety and security, as well as individual human rights. This also extends to families, with family honour being a key component of dignity. Social, or collective, dignity exists at several interlocking levels – at the level of the clan, the barangay or municipality, the M'ranao ethnolinguistic group, the entire Bangsamoro people (the 13 Muslim tribes of Mindanao) and all Muslims worldwide. Collective dignity relates to prestige and honour, and it is woven into the complex political economy and conflict dynamics of the area.

3.2.2 Gendered dignity

The literature review for this project hypothesised that, based on the limited research that had been published, perceptions of dignity among men and women did not seem to differ dramatically in concept, though they may do so in practice (Holloway and Grandi, 2018). This was borne out by the fieldwork, with no perceived differences noted in Lebanon or the Philippines. In Bangladesh, though Rohingya women view purdah as their dignity, it was also important for men's dignity, and many of the men interviewed felt that women's observance of purdah preserved the entire family's dignity. As one man in Gundum declared: 'Purdah is important to us and, I think, to all Rohingya men'.

Colombia was the only context where men and women conceptualised dignity differently, with

women associating it with character and value and men associating it with economic autonomy and participation in politics and community life. When confronted with the need for food assistance, women were more likely to view food as an urgent requirement for survival, while men saw it as a symbol of their lack of self-reliance. Similarly, women viewed shelter, or 'living with dignity', as security and protection for themselves and their family, whereas men saw it in terms of land ownership.

3.2.3 Age-differentiated dignity

Because little to no research has been done on how youth and the elderly conceptualise dignity, many of the case studies for this project deliberately held focus groups with different ages. Through these and individual interviews, the main distinction that emerged was the emphasis placed on age-specific services, such as education and healthcare. In South Sudan, focus groups of youth expressed the feeling that their dignity was not respected because they lacked educational opportunities in the camps and, therefore, prospects for the future. In Lebanon, older displaced Syrians were more likely to mention poor access to adequate health services as impinging on their dignity and fundamental rights.

For Rohingya interviewed for this study, the social aspect of dignity and its association with mutual respect was inter-generational. A 46-year-old man in Jamtoli described dignity as 'living in harmony with everyone, elders respecting youth and youth respecting elders' – a view shared by youth and elderly members of the community. In one focus group of youth who had lived in Kutupalong for the past 12 years, participants agreed that dignity meant being respected by elders, so they could mutually respect one another. In another focus group, this time of elderly Rohingya, one participant stated: 'Dignity to me is respecting your elders and loving the youth. This to me is at the heart of dignity'.

3.3 Dignity is about how aid is given

Related to dignity as respect, which was present in all of the case studies for this project, is the idea put forward by Oxley (2018) that: 'Whilst *what* a humanitarian agency does in terms of meeting the basic needs of disaster victims is essential to sustain lives, *how* it does this is fundamental to maintaining human dignity'. All of the case studies highlighted how undignified people felt having to wait in queues

to receive aid, with South Sudanese study participants specifically mentioning how women felt humiliated when they were given personal hygiene kits (often called ‘dignity kits’) while waiting in queues with men to receive food items. Interviewees in Bangladesh, Lebanon and the Philippines all suggested that home-delivered aid would be a more dignified method of distribution. This is also recommended in many humanitarian guidelines, though this is not systematically applied in practice (ISCG, 2017; Sphere Project, 2018).

Giving aid transparently and with face-to-face communication are key priorities of the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network, the Communicating with Communities (CwC) approach and the Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) approach. It is also part of the Core Humanitarian Standard and is included in the Grand Bargain. The CDAC Network was established in 2009 to make aid more effective through communication, information exchange and community engagement. CwC links communication and accountability and is seen as a rights-based approach to community empowerment and an enabler of accountability, whereas AAP focuses on giving communities influence over decisions, transparently and effectively sharing information with communities and giving them the opportunity to hold humanitarian organisations to account (CDAC, 2014; IASC, 2015). The fourth and fifth commitment of the Core Humanitarian Standard state that ‘communities and people affected by crisis know their rights and entitlements, have access to information and participate in decisions that affect them’ and that they ‘have access to safe and responsive mechanisms to handle complaints’ (CHS Alliance et al., 2014: 9). The Grand Bargain agreed at the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016 includes a workstream on the ‘participation revolution’, or including people who receive aid in decisions affecting them. This research suggests that, while much work has been done in this area over the past decade, more needs to be done to put it into practice.

3.3.1 Dignity in transparency and clear targeting

The importance of fairness and openness around targeting criteria and how aid allocation decisions are made was apparent in all case studies. In Afghanistan, lack of communication and transparency around which part of the population is chosen to receive aid and how that decision is made led to allegations of corruption against the Maliks, or community leaders, who are often in charge of distributing aid. In Colombia, IDPs explained how

it was difficult for them to understand certain types of positive discrimination, such as when women or disabled people are prioritised, but that if it is clearly explained, then they do not feel their dignity has been threatened on account of being excluded.

Rohingya interviewees explained that they understood if a family with twice as many members received twice as much food, but if the same family also received an extra non-food item, such as a floor mat or a lantern, they did not understand the reason since every family has a house, and everyone needed these items. Unequal distributions appeared to create tensions between neighbours rather than with aid organisations, upsetting the already precarious community spirit in the camps, where only 28% of the Rohingya interviewed for this project said they had the same neighbours as in Myanmar.

Interviewees in the Philippines also said that they did not understand how targeting criteria were set, leading to confusion, jealousy and resentment between neighbours and relatives. Unlike Bangladesh, where refugees are all in roughly the same situation, the different layers of need following the Marawi Siege may create more clearly demarcated groups in need of assistance, but the rules governing which group receives what type of assistance remain obscure. For example, renters and those considered part of the transient population in the main affected area of Marawi are not eligible for housing support because they did not own property; victims of flooding during the typhoon received immediate food and cash assistance, but may not have been eligible for non-food items or cash-for-work schemes. Similar attitudes towards targeting were found in a study following Typhon Haiyan in 2013, where ‘the general sentiment was to do away with targeted aid altogether’ (Ong et al., 2015: 39).

Finally, virtually none of the Syrians interviewed for this study felt they understood how people were chosen to receive aid or where the money raised in their name went, nor did they feel aid was allocated fairly. Many said it was ‘just based on luck’, or that ‘the UN has randomly chosen the names’. Lack of transparency was also an issue in a 2017 perception survey, with 46% of respondents agreeing that cash transfers were neither fair nor transparent (Ground Truth Solutions, 2017). This is partly due to the limited reach of the aid that is available, given that in 2017 only 17% of displaced Syrians in Lebanon received cash assistance, despite the fact that nearly 70% of those registered with UNHCR were eligible for it (Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018: 39).

Another reason, however, is that aid organisations are reluctant to share targeting criteria with the displaced population because they feel it is too difficult to communicate in a meaningful way, or that doing so will lead to changed behaviour or fraud.

3.3.2 Dignity in face-to-face communication

Many case studies also included the style of communication in their perceptions of dignity. This supports the link made by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in its *Professional standards for protection* between dignity and ‘taking the time and having the empathy to listen to, and interact with, individuals and communities’ (ICRC, 2018: 28). The 2018 edition of the *State of the humanitarian system* report found that people who were consulted on or able to give feedback about a programme were more than three times as likely to say they had been treated with respect and dignity (ALNAP, 2018).

Displaced people interviewed in Afghanistan, Colombia and Bangladesh emphasised the need for mutual respect and good behaviour from aid workers in order for them to feel dignified. In Afghanistan, respondents stressed that the behaviour of the distributor, no matter who they were and irrespective of the organisation they worked for, was important to their dignity. IDPs in Colombia were even more specific, saying that they did not just want to be treated well, they wanted to be treated as adults, rather than with condescension or as if they were incapable of deciding their own future. In Bangladesh, a 30-year-old Rohingya woman mentioned that she felt dignified when aid workers spoke calmly to her, listened to her needs and were honest about whether they would be able to help her. Others said that, when aid workers took the time to stop by their homes and ask how they were doing, they felt their dignity was upheld.

Like the Rohingya, Syrians in Lebanon explained that face-to-face communication was important. This should be taken in the context of changes in the way UNHCR communicates, whereby people starting to receive aid, as well as people for whom aid is being stopped, are notified via text message. One woman said that these ‘messages sent by the UN and other organisations were not reaching everyone ... [and that] there should be a better way to communicate with people’. Other Syrians interviewed for this project said that simply receiving a text message made them feel undignified, particularly since they felt that UNHCR could not understand their true situation without seeing it first-hand. Buchanan-Smith et al. (2016) found similar results following the earthquakes

in Nepal in 2015, where local people’s preferred channels and sources of information differed from the channels favoured by humanitarian responders. As in Lebanon, people in Nepal preferred face-to-face communication for information that was directly relevant to their needs, whereas humanitarian responders used the radio as a cheap and easy way to broadcast messages at scale (see also Wall and Chéry, 2010; Internews, 2015)

Several studies have looked at tailoring accountability mechanisms to the local context, though it remains to be seen how much the humanitarian sector is prepared to invest in understanding what the practical and locally specific barriers to accountability are (Fluck and Barter, 2019). In the Rohingya response, several studies have found that feedback/complaints boxes and hotlines did not work because of low literacy rates among the Rohingya (less than 30%) and their inability to legally obtain a SIM card in Bangladesh. Face-to-face communication and voice recorders were found to be preferred by the Rohingya (Christian Aid and Gana Unnayan Kendra, 2018; Fluck and Barter, 2019). In Somalia, by contrast, Oxfam found that a toll-free four-digit accountability number was well-utilised (Fluck and Barter, 2019).

3.3.3 Dignity in cash-based aid

The literature review for this project noted that cash-based aid has become increasingly central in humanitarian responses because of several perceived advantages: its cost-effectiveness, flexibility and positive effects on local economies; its ability to provide immediate relief while addressing long-term underlying issues; and its presumed ability to empower recipients and restore dignity by allowing them to prioritise needs and choose how to address them (Holloway and Grandi, 2018). Cash has been consistently linked to improving the dignity of affected populations (Harvey, 2005; 2007; UNHCR, 2012; Gourlay, 2013; High Level Panel on Humanitarian Cash Transfers, 2015; Bastagli et al., 2016; European Commission, 2016; DFID, 2017).

In Lebanon, displaced Syrians almost invariably associated cash with aid in general, since it is the main form of assistance they received. In 2014, 30 organisations were providing some form of cash assistance (Bailey and Harvey, 2017). Of the 38 people who were directly asked whether they preferred cash or in-kind aid, all but one said that cash was always better because of the increased independence it offered, the privacy gained from not having to standing in queues and because many of the things they needed to pay for could not be provided in-kind,

such as rent and paying off debts. At the same time, given that just 17% of displaced Syrians receive cash from UNHCR, some also linked cash, or rather the lack of it, with indignity, and many remarked that, even for those who did receive cash, it is often not enough to cover all their family's needs. Thus, while cash can enable a more dignified response, it, like all aid, must also be combined with transparency and clear communication about who is receiving it and why, and will always be constrained by the limited resources available.

In Colombia, IDPs likewise saw cash programming as both upholding and undermining dignity. While it enabled them to make their own decisions, interviewees complained that the organisations providing it required them to queue for up to 12 hours to be registered and receive it. Done in this way, cash-based assistance loses one of the main advantages mentioned by Syrians in Lebanon: privacy. In the Philippines, cash was preferred to in-kind assistance because it allowed for a wider range of food beyond rice, noodles and canned foods, but for housing repairs it was seen as inferior to materials given in kind because respondents noted that, while government officials might steal cash, they would not take building materials.

In Bangladesh, cash was not mentioned directly in interviews, aside from those conducted in Nayapara, since, at the time of the research it was not widespread in any other camp, despite the presence of a Cox's Bazar Cash Working Group since November 2017 (Vassas and Laïda, 2018). When Rohingya were asked about cash in the final validation FGDs, there was a clear distinction between new arrivals in the camps and those who had been in the camps for more than 10 years. Those who had newly arrived preferred cash over in-kind aid, as it would allow them to buy what their families wanted and needed without the risk of wasting goods that they could not use. Those who had been in the camps for more than 10 years,

however, decided after a group discussion that they preferred in-kind aid because it was seen as reliable and sustainable, and they were worried that there would not be enough stock in local shops to meet all their needs. In Nayapara, cash was overwhelmingly preferred because it was seen as a daily necessity in a camp where the host community and some humanitarian actors charge rent for land and demand payment or bribes for aid. Giving refugees cash because they need it to pay rent or bribes is, of course, not the same as giving cash to promote their dignity through increased choice and agency.

3.3.4 Dignity in culturally sensitive aid

Although this section focuses on *how* aid is given, that is not to say that *what* aid is delivered is unimportant. In many of the case studies, interviewees gave examples of culturally insensitive goods that were described as impinging on their dignity. In Bangladesh, 'dignity kits' given to women as they crossed the border included pieces of white cloth, which no Rohingya wanted to wear because it resembled the kafan cloth used by Muslims for burial. Beyond being culturally insensitive, this may have also been traumatic for many who had just witnessed friends and relatives dying as they fled Myanmar. Given the importance the Rohingya place on *purdah* as part of their dignity, many pointed to distribution queues and latrines that were not gender-segregated as undermining their dignity.

Likewise in the Philippines, a lack of understanding of or attention to Islamic and M'ranao beliefs resulted in canned pork products in food deliveries, a lack of appropriate clothing, such as hijabs (head scarfs), niqabs (veils) and malongs (traditional multi-purpose skirts) in donation packs and poorly designed temporary shelters where women lacked privacy around non-family members. In Afghanistan, a culture where women typically remain indoors all day, shelters made of iron were impossible to stay in in the summer, when temperatures in Jalalabad reach 40°–45°C.

4 Humanitarian actors' understanding of dignity

This chapter summarises the main findings from the interviews with humanitarian actors undertaken for this project, and reassesses the initial hypothesis that more locally led aid will lead to a more dignified response.

4.1 Aid actors' understanding of dignity

Most international and local aid actors interviewed in the case study countries highlighted that dignity was an important concept in humanitarian action, and one that they took seriously in their responses and aimed to uphold. Individual conceptualisations of dignity inevitably varied. In Lebanon and Bangladesh, aid actors' understanding of the term can be broadly categorised under three umbrella areas: rights and protection; respect and communication; and agency and independence. In Bangladesh, given the acute nature of the crisis, dignity was also strongly connected to meeting basic needs.

4.1.1 Dignity as linked to rights and protection

In both Lebanon and Bangladesh, humanitarian actors closely linked dignity with rights, though there were nuances in emphasis in each country. In Bangladesh, respondents highlighted the importance of protection – at its most basic level keeping people safe – and respect for human rights in terms of upholding dignity. As a respondent in Bangladesh put it: 'rights are dignity and dignity itself is a right'. For the Rohingya, this includes the right to freedom of movement, work and education – all of which they are currently denied. Several respondents also believed that the priority for a dignified response was placing the restoration of human rights as well as protection at the centre, and recognising the crisis as both a human rights and a humanitarian one.

In Lebanon, humanitarian workers equally emphasised that dignity meant 'giving people the possibility

of enjoying their rights' and that 'equating service provision to dignity was not enough'. For many, the ability to meet basic needs was seen as an integral part of a rights-based approach that includes respect for all rights – 'physical needs, food, shelter, life, work, education and healthcare'. Many respondents directly linked rights to having proper legal status and papers – a fundamental concern for many Syrians. Interviewees stressed the importance of a 'people-centred and rights-based approach' to compensate for the protection and entitlements that Syrians have lost by virtue of living in a country in which they are not citizens. Some projects, such as the Danish Refugee Council (DRC)'s programme on legal aid, explicitly aim to support people in claiming and defending their rights by providing legal advice on documentation and status and legal representation.

4.1.2 Dignity and links to respect and communication

The importance of communication and respect in upholding people's dignity was clear in interviews with aid workers in both Lebanon and Bangladesh. In Lebanon, interviewees highlighted the importance of respectful treatment in upholding Syrians' dignity, and how they actively tried to build a 'culture of respect' that recognised both individual circumstances and the social and cultural context. Respondents cited examples where local NGO workers would 'respond to refugees in inappropriate ways' because they did not know how to listen to and interact with people in the right way. Other examples included aid workers and their guests taking photos or videos of people in need, which was seen as humiliating to beneficiaries – an issue that has been hotly debated since the Ethiopian famine in the mid-1980s (Lidchi, 2015; Holloway and Grandi, 2018). The ability to listen and communicate appropriately was a key issue for humanitarian workers interviewed in both Lebanon and Bangladesh. This is also a reflection of increasing global understanding and effort, stemming from the WHS and under the auspices of the CDAC Network,

to put communication and community engagement at the forefront of humanitarian response.³

In Lebanon, aid workers mentioned the importance of CwC working groups in terms of coordination, as well as highlighting limitations in official channels of communication. There were particular concerns that technological advances, such as mass text messaging campaigns used to inform people of their eligibility (or ineligibility) for aid, rather than face-to-face communication, were having corrosive effects on how respected people felt. Similarly, a proxy means test developed through vulnerability profiles had led to a reduction in household visits and human contact. Several NGO workers highlighted the trade-offs between operating at scale and preserving individual contact, and noted the links between direct contact, protection and dignity.

In Bangladesh, the importance of communication and the ability to genuinely listen to and act on people's concerns was widely acknowledged – especially by aid staff working on CwC. Many emphasised that, while there had been important progress in this area, there were still major gaps, often stemming from problems with language and translation. Several humanitarian actors highlighted the importance of communication, not only to engage with the Rohingya but also to develop a deeper understanding of their priorities and concerns – something aid agencies often do not do well because they pose only 'narrow questions' and 'guiding answers'. As one respondent put it: 'We haven't been asking the right questions and we've been satisfied with answers without probing'. These responses align with findings from a real-time evaluation of CwC coordination in Bangladesh, which notes the limited ways in which feedback collected from the community has been shared, the lack of influence it has had on informing the response and the near-absence of any feedback loop (Buchanan-Smith and Islam, 2018). One notable exception offered by several respondents was the publication *What matters*, a newsletter featuring refugees' views produced by the Common Service for Community Engagement and Accountability (CSCEA) consortium, comprising BBC Media Action, Internews and Translators without Borders. The key difference here was a methodology of 'active and unconditional listening', where refugees can speak about anything without prescriptive questions or assumptions. The consortium prioritised investment in Rohingya translators and worked in the Rohingya language.

4.1.3 Dignity as agency and independence

Many humanitarian actors in both Lebanon and Bangladesh also linked dignity to agency, participation, independence and choice. In Lebanon, several aid workers highlighted that, for them, dignity meant recognising people's right and ability to make decisions, rather than having others make these choices for them. They saw their responsibility as ensuring that 'refugees have the ability to choose their own actions'. Many saw cash assistance as a good way to guarantee that ability to choose: 'cash is dignity'. Cash provision was also seen as respecting people's privacy as 'Syrians generally do not want to take anything in front of others'. Some aid workers, like Syrians themselves, also linked dignity with the right to work. In Bangladesh, dignity – whether in terms of meeting basic needs, ensuring communication or protection – was often closely tied to people's agency and their active participation in programmatic choices and relief efforts.

A number of examples from Bangladesh were cited as good practice, such as healthcare programmes championing women as community volunteers who then seek out others, or 'community-based protection' programmes, where communities define and become involved in their own protection. Yet as noted above, linking dignity to agency and choice highlights the fundamental tension in humanitarian aid: that, while people may welcome the support they receive, having to rely on the help of another is the moment many feel least dignified precisely because their agency and independence have been taken away.

4.1.4 Dignity as meeting basic needs

Whereas respondents in Lebanon also linked dignity with meeting Syrians' basic needs and ensuring a certain standard of living, in Bangladesh the importance of meeting basic needs in order to preserve people's dignity was clearly key for most interviewees. INGO workers in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), health and protection sectors in particular articulated dignity in this way. This is likely a reflection of the acuteness of the crisis in Bangladesh and the trade-offs that aid workers face between keeping pace with the scale and intensity of the crisis while at the same time providing a dignified service. Many aid workers acknowledged that ensuring dignity, for example in the public health response, had not always been possible or prioritised at the start, when saving lives and treating as many people as possible often took precedence. Latrines,

3 For an overview of the different initiatives under way, see www.cdacnetwork.org/. For a useful overview of efforts to implement the Communication and Community Engagement initiative in various countries, see this Special Feature of the Humanitarian Exchange: <https://odihpn.org/magazine/communication-community-engagement-humanitarian-response/>

for instance, were built with no segregation between men's and women's facilities. As the response has matured changes have been introduced, including more consultative approaches with the Rohingya in the planning and provision of basic services, in particular for women and girls. Dignity was also clearly a concern when implementing programmes on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) or protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA), with one INGO using code words or symbols in lieu of naming the kind of treatment people were seeking, hence avoiding the need to speak about sensitive or traumatic experiences to strangers.

4.1.5 Overlap of understandings of dignity between aid workers and recipients

One underlying assumption of this research was that, where conceptualisations of dignity between aid workers and recipients overlapped, the overall response would be seen as more dignified. However, our findings suggest that truly upholding people's dignity requires more than that.

In Lebanon, humanitarian actors and displaced people talked about the same aspects of dignity – focusing on the importance of rights, respect and independence. Yet Syrian interviewees did not see the response as dignified. This was partly due to a perceived lack of accountability and transparency, as well as differing ideas around equality and fairness and instances of poor communication and lack of respect. But partly these perceptions were also due to external circumstances – beyond the remit of the humanitarian response itself – such as lack of funding and different expectations in terms of overall living standards. Syrians had lost much of the rights, living standards and independence they enjoyed in Syria, and found living in displacement inherently inferior and undignified compared to their previous circumstances. Even though humanitarian actors understood these frustrations, they could not address them all through the humanitarian response.

In Bangladesh, by contrast, aid actors conceived of dignity differently to the Rohingya – focusing largely on common humanitarian concepts such as basic needs, communication, protection and agency, whereas the Rohingya emphasised dignity's social, religious and economic dimensions. Even so, Rohingya interviewees felt that the overall humanitarian response prioritised their dignity, largely because the persecution they faced in Myanmar had ended and the relative freedom they experienced in the camps in Bangladesh meant that they were able to feel respected and free to practice their religion and enjoy their culture. Thus,

even though the humanitarian community did not focus on these aspects directly, the overall response was seen as prioritising their dignity – largely due to local circumstances and past experiences out of the control of humanitarian actors.

Thus, while there are certainly areas where humanitarian and other actors can focus on upholding the dignity of displaced people, dignity often has to do with other, complex factors beyond their immediate reach. This suggests that dignity is not something that can necessarily be 'delivered' or upheld through the humanitarian response alone; rather, other underlying aspects and longer-term partnerships and efforts with different – not only humanitarian – actors may have to be considered to fully live up to the aspiration to uphold people's dignity.

4.2 Do local aid actors provide a more dignified response?

This project's hypothesis that local aid agencies are more in tune with people's needs and wants – due to their contextual knowledge – and are thus better able to deliver a dignified response than their international counterparts was not demonstrated by the research findings.

In both Lebanon and Bangladesh, people could rarely distinguish between local and international actors, nor did they think that distinction was particularly relevant. Most Rohingya are illiterate and organisations often employ Bangladeshi staff and Rohingya volunteers to carry out distributions, making it difficult to know which organisation is international or local. As one woman living in Kutupalong put it: 'I have received rations, food, cooking utensils, a tube well, latrine, water. I can't read the name of the organisations, so I do not know what they are'. Others who could read often could not remember the names or did not know whether they were local or international as staff were mainly Bangladeshi. Syrians could also often not distinguish between different organisations – except for UN agencies – as NGOs must employ 90% Lebanese staff.

Strikingly, in both Lebanon and Bangladesh people thought the distinction between local and international organisations was irrelevant, as refugees were more concerned that their basic needs were being met and aid was delivered in a respectful and transparent way, rather than *who* delivered the aid. Statements such as 'all the NGOs are the same.

Different NGOs do different jobs. They are all the same' were common in Bangladesh. Syrians – where they could identify them – praised and criticised local, national or international organisations equally, and were more likely to allude to differences between individuals than between organisations. Comments such as 'some employees were nice. Some were rude to us' were frequent.

In both countries, tensions with host communities tended to overshadow any benefits that a more 'local' or regional response might have had. Tensions between hosts and refugees were exacerbated by the recent influx into Bangladesh – which led, among other things, to higher prices, lower wages, lost farmland, large-scale environmental degradation and worries about health and security among host communities (COAST, 2018; International Crisis Group, 2018). Although some Bangladeshis managed to take advantage of increased employment opportunities in local or international organisations, they often vented these tensions by treating refugees poorly, physically or verbally abusing them and asking for bribes. As one Rohingya man stated: 'They always treat us badly and look down on us, especially the Bangladeshi staff ... They talk to us the way the Burmese soldiers talk to us ... The NGOs, especially the Bangladeshi staff, discriminate a lot and talk to us in a very mean way'.

Many Syrians claimed that local organisations were corrupt, with distributions based on favouritism and aid potentially ending up in the hands of Lebanese family members. Comments like this one heard in Tripoli were frequent: 'With local NGOs it's all about *wasta* [nepotism]. Only if you know someone inside will you get anything'. Refugees also wanted to see a code of conduct for staff of local and international organisations and volunteers, in case they behaved badly or disrespectfully. Although most organisations have such codes, they are rarely made easily accessible or sufficiently visible, leading many Syrian interviewees to feel that they did not exist. Where local organisations were praised this was often linked to appropriate religious or cultural practices, such as giving special Iftar (fast-breaking) meals or providing culturally appropriate gifts for Christmas or Eid.

Compared to the refugee contexts in Lebanon and Bangladesh, in the IDP case studies in the Philippines, Colombia and Afghanistan tensions with host communities were less of an issue. However, in these

cases too respondents expressed no clear preferences towards either local or international agencies. Rather, a more nuanced picture emerged. Local and international agencies were appreciated for their skills and different assets, while also being criticised for their shortcomings.

In Colombia, international aid actors were referred to as a 'parade of vests', showing off their logos, emblems and material assets to poor communities. They were also accused of tokenistic interactions with displaced populations that seemed intended more to 'satisfy personal curiosity' rather than a genuine attempt to understand people's needs. At the same time, their neutrality and lack of bias were much appreciated. For their part, local organisations were valued for their good contextual knowledge and understanding of local customs, while being seen as more susceptible to value judgements and prejudices around IDPs' place of origin and political affiliations or the causes of their displacement. They were also seen as more corruptible. Corruption, in this case among local government officials, was also a concern raised in the Philippines study. In Afghanistan respondents were unable to distinguish between local and international agencies, but highlighted instead the importance of how aid is distributed and organised, and the behaviour and ways of communicating of aid agency staff.

These findings throw up important questions for the current trend of localising aid, and around what is considered *local* in any given response. In our studies, Bangladeshis and Lebanese may be local to the context, but they are not local to the displaced population, and as host communities often have very different values, ideas and expectations. Here, any advantages they may have in terms of local contextual understanding and ability to navigate the local bureaucracy and context may be outweighed by tensions around resources, which in turn may undermine the dignity of the affected population. It is thus important to scrutinise in more depth *why* the sector is aiming to localise aid and understand what this may mean in practice – in particular in refugee contexts where the desire for 'localisation' will need to be carefully balanced with the goal of upholding the dignity of the displaced (Holloway, 2018). From the research it is clear that, in most cases, more important than the origin of the aid organisation was the way in which aid was being delivered, and how well the organisation understood the local and cultural context and sensitivities.

5 Conclusion and recommendations

The six case studies covered in this research have shown how varied concerns around dignity are. However, across the case studies what people felt was important were actually the key ingredients of an *effective and dignified humanitarian response* – one that is open, transparent, fair, respectful and accountable to local populations. When it comes to dignity, *what* aid was delivered and *who* delivered it seemed to matter less to people than *how* that aid was given.

So, what does this mean for humanitarian actors? What are the key ingredients of getting the *how* of humanitarian programming right so that it lives up to the ambition of upholding people’s dignity? A number of things stand out.

Listening and understanding what people are saying

A theme emerging from all the cases studies is that people want to be listened to – properly listened to. Many of those interviewed lamented that humanitarians still mostly engage in tokenistic listening, structured around needs assessment tools that only look for things that have been pre-identified as important. Programmes are designed based on answers to extractive questions, rather than allowing communities to talk about what they think is important.

Genuine listening could address much of what was raised in this report: if upholding dignity is a lot about understanding local and cultural specificities, then there is a strong argument for humanitarian agencies to invest in good listening skills. This should be done from the start of the response to make sure this knowledge informs the provision of basic needs in the emergency phase. In this way, a key issue for the Rohingya, such as the lack of segregation of toilet facilities, could have been addressed early on. Similarly, issues such as the importance of religious practice could have been incorporated into programming from the outset. Aid agencies’ frames of reference are often secular and, with few exceptions, often ignore the place religion occupies in people’s lives and how it relates to communities’ priorities. Yet as our study has shown that for at least

three of the case studies – Afghanistan, Bangladesh and the Philippines – the religious dimension is key to perceptions of dignity, and therefore has to be properly understood.

Our findings and recommendations echo and support many of the priorities around listening and communication identified by a number of current initiatives. There is much momentum behind supporting better listening and engaging with communities under the ‘accountability’ umbrella, with many interesting initiatives around communication, community engagement and AAP. Projects such as the CDAC Network, the Listening Project, Internews and Ground Truth Solutions are providing the humanitarian community with ideas and tools for listening to and learning from affected people, as well as involving them in their own response. Much of the focus is on the quality, relevance and perception of the aid response – key issues also identified as pivotal in this report. There is less focus currently on dignity; little is known about what dignity means to different people in different contexts, or how agencies can put into practice their commitment to upholding dignity.

The value of face-to-face communication

Another theme coming out of this research is the importance of face-to-face communication. Across the six case studies, respondents highlighted how important this was in terms of feeling respected and dignified. This was true regardless of how comfortable or familiar affected people were with digital and text message communication. What does this mean in an age of technology? There may well be a trade-off between improving the efficiency of a large-scale response by using simpler and more cost-effective ways of communication, such as mass text messages as in Lebanon, and the impact this has on how dignified people feel. If agencies are to take people’s perceptions of dignity seriously, they may need to invest more in costly and time-consuming face-to-face interactions, particularly during the assessment phase.

Different modalities of communication may also be better suited to different points in the response. For

example, Syrians in Lebanon – who were used to text message communication by aid agencies – still preferred face-to-face communication when being assessed or told of their eligibility for aid, rather than finding out by text message, because they wanted to feel engaged and understood through direct human contact. If aid actors are to be truly accountable to people and support their dignity, they will need to invest more in understanding when different means of communication are most useful and – most importantly – how they make recipients feel. Again, there will inevitably be trade-offs here that will need to be carefully considered.

Consider the local culture and language

Given the difficulty of understanding an intricate and nuanced concept such as dignity in a given context, more consideration should be given to the local culture and language of the affected population. As seen earlier in this report, culture, history and the background of displacement all determine people's understanding of dignity and the things they value most – information that is often overlooked in the first stages of a humanitarian response, and which is rarely used to inform project design and implementation. Yet this knowledge is extremely valuable, not only for understanding people's concerns, but also for giving more granularity and depth to local and contextual understanding and knowledge. Some organisations, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, are already doing this through the involvement of anthropologists throughout their responses; others, such as UNICEF, used social science researchers in the Rohingya response, but only for standalone tasks and background research (see Ripoll, 2017), which was not holistically integrated into programme design. Moreover, if humanitarians are committed to upholding dignity, they need to understand the local words that correspond to it, and the nuances of those terms, and explore what they mean for displaced people. Translators without Borders works closely with humanitarian organisations around the world in carrying out socio-linguistic research, but more could be done. Experts such as these are an important resource at the start of a response, as well as working alongside humanitarian programme teams throughout it.

The paradox of humanitarian assistance

Even if people are listened to, communicated with and understood, and this information drives project design and implementation, there is still a paradox that humanitarian assistance tends to reinforce

people's feelings that they are not self-reliant. Numerous humanitarian organisations have invested in livelihoods programmes to promote self-reliance, though in many locations these programmes are constrained by government restrictions on work and freedom of movement for displaced communities. In these circumstances, more emphasis could be given to participation in the humanitarian response, allowing affected people to involve themselves in determining what the community's needs are, designing projects to meet those needs, implementing these projects and monitoring and evaluating their outcomes – similar to Local to Global's survivor- and community-led crisis responses (see, for example, Antequisa and Corbett, 2018; Grundin and Saadeh, 2018). More recognition needs to be given to the tension between aid and dignity, and efforts made to make people feel that, wherever possible, they have control over their lives and their future.

Complementarity of aid response

As we have seen, *who* delivered the aid – whether local, regional or international – was not what mattered most to recipients. What was most important was the skills, knowledge and behaviours exhibited by individuals working for these organisations. In particular, it was aid agencies' ability to deliver a good response that was locally relevant and culturally appropriate that was pinpointed across the six case studies as most important for upholding people's dignity. Neither local nor international organisations had all the skills necessary to do this, and each had advantages and disadvantages in the eyes of aid recipients. In particular in displacement contexts, many of the advantages local organisations are presumed to have over international ones were outweighed by tensions with host communities. This throws up important questions for the 'localisation' debate. What do we mean by labels such as 'local' and 'international'? Does it matter? To what extent can we/do we make that distinction? Having aid that is locally led needs to be carefully weighed against what this might mean in practice for the dignity of displaced people.

Instead of unquestioningly promoting locally led aid, it may be more useful to talk about complementarity of aid. Barbelet (2018: 17) defines complementarity as 'an outcome where all capacities at all levels – local, national, regional, international – are harnessed and combined in a way that supports the best humanitarian outcomes for affected populations'. Rather than focusing on labels that in practice may not mean much,

a more effective and dignified response is one that draws on each organisations' strengths.⁴

Dignity cannot simply be delivered

Lastly, what this report has shown is that – despite what many aid agency documents promise – dignity is not really something that humanitarian aid can either promise or necessarily deliver, at least on its own. While there are certainly important ways in which aid can promote or undermine people's dignity, perceptions of dignity also depend on many other factors that go beyond the remit of what the humanitarian response can actually provide, including the living standards displaced people are used to, levels of funding for the response and the overall policy environment in which displaced people find themselves. What this study has highlighted is that,

rather than promising that they can uphold people's dignity, it might be more appropriate (and honest) for humanitarians to be open about the limitations of what they can do through the response and what might not be possible. This might mean thinking of dignity more as one objective of the overall response – but one that is broken down into the practical elements actually involved – and acknowledging that there are likely to be many other elements that humanitarian efforts will not address. Once this has been made clear, aid actors can then put more effort into linking up with others – development actors, advocacy specialists, peacebuilding actors – that can take over and support people in furthering their dignity, for example on the rights of Syrians in Lebanon, over which humanitarian actors have very limited traction.

⁴ For more on complementarity, see HPG's two-year project 'Understanding capacity and complementarity in humanitarian response' (www.odi.org/projects/2923-understanding-capacity-and-complementarity-humanitarian-response).

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Cover photo: Farida, then 12, collecting water in jerry cans. She was an Afghan IDP who moved back to her village Istalif, north of Kabul. Istalif was razed totally by the Taliban. © UNHCR/Natalie Behring-Chisholm, 2002.

