

# Informing and listening must go hand-in-hand:

Host communities in Cox's Bazar  
need meaningful participation to  
build trust in the response

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This paper presents key findings from our fifth round of perception surveys with host community members in Cox's Bazar, conducted in partnership with Protyashi and Helvetas Bangladesh. Our work is made possible with the support of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). To see our previous reports on feedback from Rohingya and host communities, or findings from our qualitative study with people with disabilities, visit our [website](#).

For more information about our work in Bangladesh or to provide feedback on this report, please contact Kai Hopkins ([kai@groundtruthsolutions.org](mailto:kai@groundtruthsolutions.org))

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# Introduction

Since 2017 the Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh, one of the country's most impoverished regions, has seen the arrival of more than 750,000 Rohingya fleeing persecution and violence in Myanmar. There are more refugees in the 33 congested camps in Teknaf and Ukhiya sub-districts than there are Bangladeshi locals in the area<sup>1</sup>. The prospect of safe return to Myanmar seems increasingly uncertain, and while approximately 100,000 Rohingya will ultimately be relocated to the island of Bhasan Char<sup>2</sup>, thousands will likely remain in Cox's Bazar for years to come.

The influx exacerbated issues for a region already suffering from poverty, lack of livelihoods, and limited access to infrastructure and basic services, leading to tensions over jobs and resources. Overcrowding has heightened the risk of landslides and fires, and raised concerns about crime, environmental degradation, and access to water. Tens of thousands continue to be devastated by recurring monsoon flooding and other climate change-induced disasters. These impacts affect not only the refugee population, but also put strain on the local Bangladeshis. As such, the humanitarian response has aimed to scale up assistance to the host population – including in livelihoods, health, education, and nutrition – whilst allaying inter-community tensions.

In late 2022, Ground Truth Solutions partnered with Helvetas Bangladesh and Protyashi to conduct its fifth round of quantitative surveys with host communities in Cox's Bazar, aiming to better understand their perceptions, priorities, and needs vis-a-vis the humanitarian response. A total of 384 people were interviewed across six Wards in Palongkhali Union. These were complemented by a series of four focus group discussions (FGDs) with 48 men and women in Wards 1, 2, 4, and 6.

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<sup>1</sup> ISCG. 2022. "[2022 JOINT RESPONSE PLAN, ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS](#)".

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR. 2022. "[Joint Government of Bangladesh – Population Breakdown as of 31 October 2022](#)".

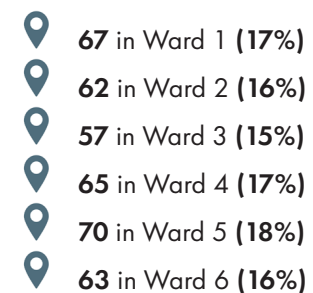
# Key Findings

- **Access to information is a priority for host communities**, but two-thirds (66%) of people we spoke to do not know what assistance is available to them, and one-third (31%) say that no one has explained to them how services can be accessed or used.
- While many **(60%) say the humanitarian response considers their views**, few (20%) believe they can influence how aid is provided.
- **Access to information impacts perceptions** around aid access, inclusion, and trust. People who feel informed are more likely believe that aid is equitable, and that humanitarians will consider their feedback and address problems fairly.
- **Few (7%) say their priority needs are being met**, which might be linked to a lack of understanding of the rules and procedures around accessing services. People say they have seen improvements in health, WASH and education services in the last year, but that assistance accessing material aid like gas, food, and non-food items has gotten worse.
- **Respondents value fairness and transparency**, but only a quarter (23%) feel aid is provided equitably, and as few as 9% say they know how agencies use funding in their area.
- **While communities felt safe** in the last month overall (85%), **half (49%) are concerned about the safety of women and girls** in their families when using latrines at night. This is a significant deterioration compared to last year, when only 10% reported this concern. People call on humanitarians to provide more security, and to build more private latrines and washrooms.
- **Our data indicates improvements on a number of variables from the previous survey.** More people feel included and are more trusting of humanitarians to resolve sensitive issues. Engagement with feedback mechanisms, although very low (14%), also seems higher than in 2021 (5%).

## We talked to

384 people

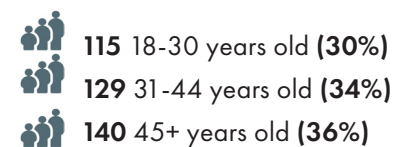
### Wards



### Sex



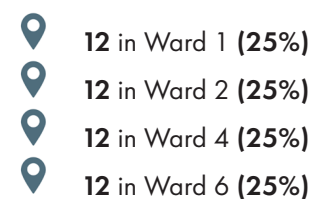
### Age



## Focus Group Discussions

48 participants

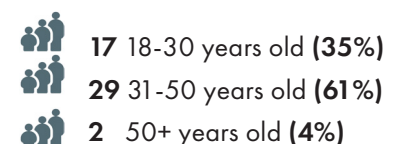
### Wards



### Sex



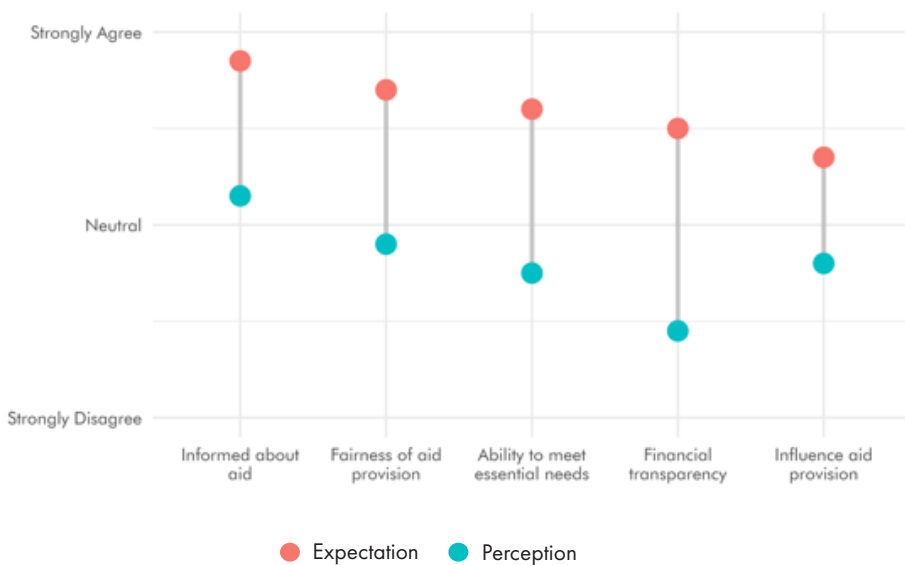
### Age



# Measuring the gap

To understand how people experience a humanitarian response, it helps to know their initial expectations as well as their perceptions<sup>3</sup>. We asked people about their expectations and perceptions to identify areas in which humanitarian organisations might improve and to set priorities<sup>4</sup>. High expectations combined with low perceptions indicate priorities for improvement.

On the whole, there is a gap between what people value and their perceptions of how these things are transpiring in real time. The gap is widest for financial transparency – people do not know how agencies spend money for humanitarian projects in their area, even though they find this information important. Humanitarians are closer to meeting people’s expectations when it comes to influencing aid. However, expectations here are lower than for any other question, indicating that people do not feel they have a right to influence the aid they receive.



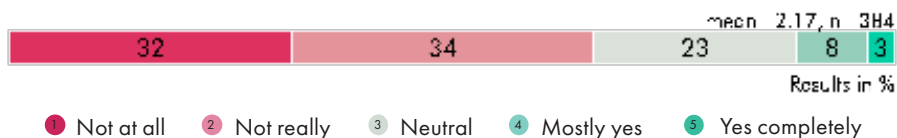
<sup>3</sup> Morgeson, Forrest V. April 2013. "Expectations, Disconfirmation, and Citizen Satisfaction with the US Federal Government: Testing and Expanding the Model". Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory 23(2): 289–305.

<sup>4</sup> Expectations are measured using the question "How important is X to you?" This is to ensure we measure expectations by how people value a concept, rather than based on past experience.

# 1. Information bolsters feelings of inclusion, but meaningful participation is still a way off

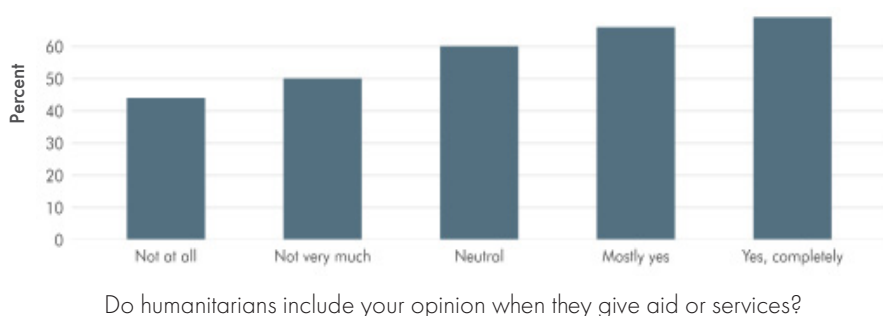
Although the vast majority of respondents (89%) believe access to information is important, many feel they don't have the information they need. Two-thirds (66%) of respondents do not know what aid is available to them, and one-third (31%) say providers have not communicated how services can be accessed or used. No significant improvement has been observed since the previous round. People in Ward 2 feel more informed than other locations, as do women compared to men. Our research team noted that since staff of humanitarian organisations conduct activities during hours when men are working, women are the ones more likely to receive information. Moreover, in spaces where men socialise with each other – including tea stalls – a reluctance to share when or how one has received aid may also be contributing to this awareness gap.

## Do you feel informed about the aid and services available to you?



Information is important, and impacts people's overall feelings about how the response is going. There is a strong correlation between feeling informed and feeling like humanitarians take people's opinion into account when providing aid. Sixty-nine percent of people who feel informed on how to receive assistance or use services also believe their opinions are considered by aid providers, compared to just 44% who feel uninformed. They are also more likely to trust that humanitarians will address their problems fairly.

## Percentage of people who said that someone explained to them how to use different services or receive assistance



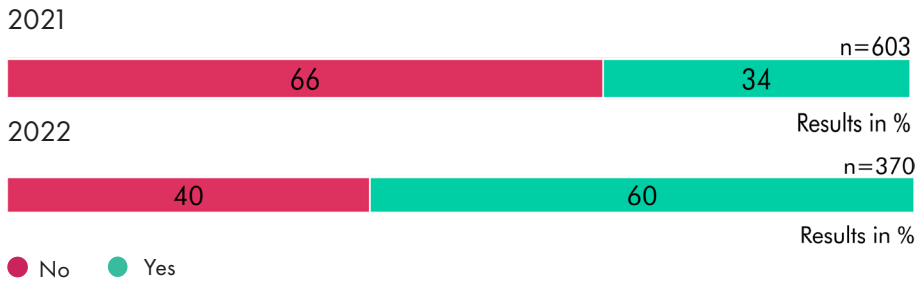
Despite 60% of people on average believing that their opinions were taken into account, a significant increase compared to 2021, only 20% believe their communities can influence how services are provided. Perceptions in Wards 3 and 4 are more negative than other locations. Only 11% believe that young people can meaningfully participate in aid, with people in Wards 1 and 3 feeling particularly negative about this.



Yes, they ask our opinion, but as soon as they leave, they do things differently than what we told them.

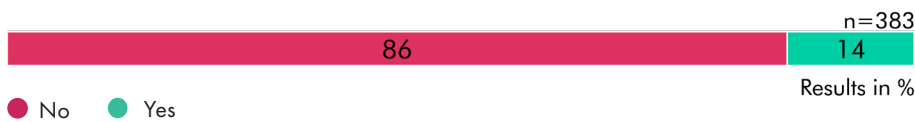
- Male FGD respondent, Ward 2

## Do humanitarians include your opinion when they give aid or services?



When asked specific questions about how they participated, two-way engagement appears lacking, similar to last year's findings. A vast majority of respondents say they have not been asked for their feedback (85%), nor consulted about potential issues with services (86%) within the last month. Although few (14%) have used an existing mechanism to lodge a complaint in the past month, this is more than 5% in the previous round.

## In the last month, have you shared a problem, reported or complained to an NGO/humanitarian organisation?



Of the 14% who used a feedback mechanism, experiences with the process are varied. It is promising to see that the majority (82%) feel listened to when sharing or reporting an issue. But in cases where concerns go unresolved, 82% say they are not receiving adequate explanations as to why. There is trust, however: over a third (39%) believe humanitarians will resolve most or all problems in a fair manner, while half (51%) are confident this will be the case at least some of the time.

Host communities interviewed for the Joint Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment had similar concerns around communication: they did not know where, or whom, to provide feedback or ask for information, and being consulted did not necessarily mean people felt their opinions were taken into account<sup>5</sup>. People we spoke to in focus groups, while appreciative of interactions with aid workers, had little hope that their feedback was being implemented.



The fact that they [humanitarian staff] come here from far away to speak to us makes us feel respected.

- Male FGD respondent, Ward 6

<sup>5</sup> ISCG and REACH. 2021. "Joint Multi-Sector Needs Assessment: Bangladesh Host Communities".

## 2. Some services have improved, but aid is failing to meet people's basic food needs

Only 7% of respondents say their most important needs are being met. Inadequate food consumption among host communities has been on the rise, with 59% of households in a WFP study citing food as a priority need<sup>6</sup>. Unable to meet basic needs, people are increasingly relying on stress coping strategies to get by, including borrowing money and buying food on credit. They are also relying on each other: 87% of those we surveyed feel they can turn to their communities, including relatives (95%) and neighbours (90%) in case of emergency. But some focus group respondents pointed out that generosity has reached its limit: in the words of a woman in Ward 4, "Who will help others when everyone is poor? Everyone is short-handed".

Those in Wards 1, 3, and 4 are more negative about their ability to meet their needs than other sampled areas. Focus group participants say all assistance is useful, but gaps remain, specifically regarding liquid petroleum gas (LPG), rice, lentils, cooking oil, as well as latrines and bathing facilities. Many also emphasised the need for more sustainable support like livestock, which would encourage self-sufficiency and allow for a steady livelihood.

According to FGD participants – especially women – distance to distribution sites, inconsistent information on schedules, and long queues impede access. They prefer distribution centres to be nearer, so that they do not risk missing out, or have to pay for costly transport.

Despite these challenges, people say there have been improvements in a number of services in the last year, including health, WASH, and education. Past research revealed satisfaction with health services had improved since NGOs began operating in host community areas<sup>7</sup> – which may provide some explanation – but access barriers including long distances to facilities, overcrowding, and cost-prohibitive medications persist<sup>8</sup>. Perceptions around WASH have likely improved due to the installation of new tube wells and the subsequent increase in access to water<sup>9</sup>, as well as greater availability of soap<sup>10</sup>. Satisfaction with education may have increased due to schools re-opening after the lifting of COVID-19 containment measures in 2021, even as gaps in learning have widened. Around half of host community households were not able to access schooling during the pandemic due to a lack of technological equipment and teaching materials, and some harboured doubts around the effectiveness of home-based learning. Many had to delay the start of their studies, while others did not return, often due to a lack of financial means<sup>11</sup>.

LPG, Food, NFIs and nutrition support have reportedly deteriorated. Negative perceptions have likely been impacted by the COVID-19 response, which saw interruptions to, or scaling down of, humanitarian activities. Livelihoods opportunities have yet to return to pre-pandemic levels even after the lifting of restrictions, increasing the host populations' reliance on humanitarian aid<sup>12</sup>.

“

The cow has been most helpful to me. I get milk from the cow which I can sell to buy food for myself as well as cattle feed for the cow. I have four daughters. The cow has been extremely helpful for me in providing for my children.

- Male FGD respondent, Ward 6

“

By the time we reach the distribution centre, the aid has already been distributed. We want it to be distributed in a nearby area so that everyone can get there and have a chance to access the goods.

- Female FGD respondent, Ward 1

<sup>6, 8</sup> WFP. 2022. "Refugee Influx Emergency Vulnerability Assessment (REVA 5)".

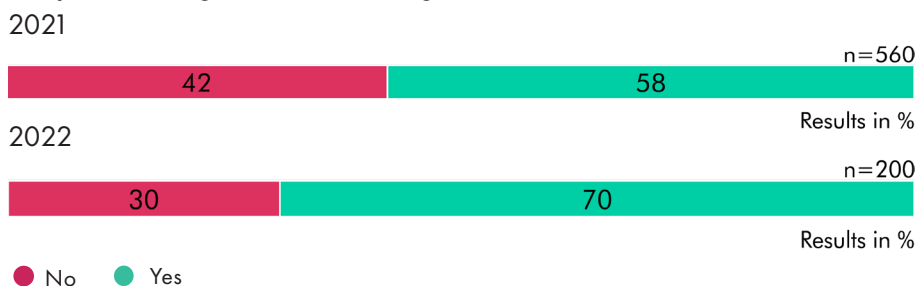
<sup>7, 9, 11</sup> ISCG and REACH. 2021. "J-MSNA Host Community Factsheet".

<sup>10, 12</sup> ACAPS. 2022. "Needs and Priorities of Rohingya Refugees and Host Communities in Cox's Bazar Since 2017".



The situation was further exacerbated by war in Ukraine and its destabilising effect on global commodity markets, leading to a 50% spike in fuel prices in August<sup>13</sup>. Lack of awareness around how to access aid contributes to negative perceptions around relevance: just a third (31%) understand the protocols and procedures around accessing services. The good news, however, is that most (70%) say they are receiving aid according to the rules explained to them, a marked improvement on last year's findings (58%). People find that WASH, food, LPG, shelter, and health services are distributed unfairly, or outside the rules, similar to those mentioned in 2021.

### Are you receiving services according to the rules?

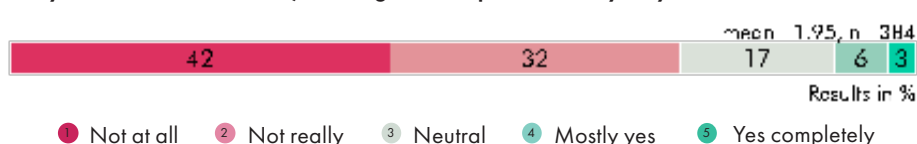


While a significant proportion indicated no strong feelings in either direction, only 23% feel assistance is being provided fairly, and few (9%) are aware of how agencies utilise funding in their area. This contrasts, however, with community expectations: the majority find fairness and transparency to be somewhat or very important (74% and 68%, respectively), which indicates the neutrality is perhaps dejection rather than a lack of opinion. Compared to other locations, Ward 6 respondents are more aware about how organisations decide to allocate funding, and those in 2, 4, and 5 are more negative when it comes to services being distributed equitably.

### Do you think aid is provided in a fair way in your community?

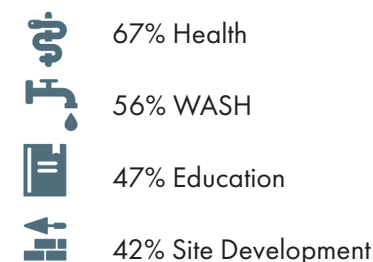


### Do you know how NGO/aid agencies spend money in your area?

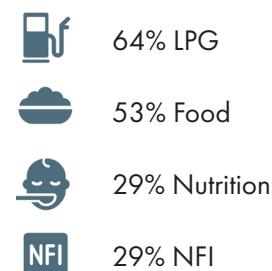


People we spoke to in our quantitative survey, as well as FGD respondents across all locations, expressed concern about favouritism and discrimination at distribution sites. They mentioned names being suspiciously removed from recipient lists, tokens being passed out inequitably, and chairmen and other local representatives giving priority to their own contacts and relatives. According to a woman interviewed in Ward 4, "The problem is that when NGOs visit the community, they come with an assistant, and this assistant is appointed by either the chairman (Union Parishad) or [local committee] member, and the assistant will distribute the relief only among his relatives." More than one respondent requested that humanitarian organisations remove middlemen altogether and distribute aid directly. Others suggested activities be conducted through community forums and civil society networks.

### What services are better than a year ago? (n=384)



### What services are worse than a year ago? (n=384)

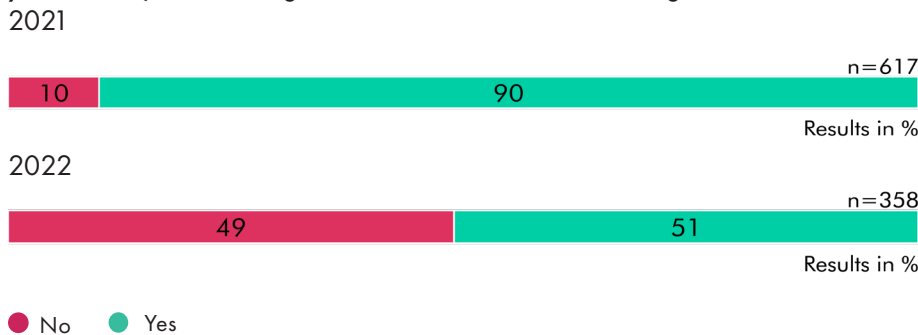


<sup>13</sup> BBC News. 14 August 2022. "Bangladesh fuel prices: 'I might start begging in the street'".

### 3. Poor social cohesion and crime raises concerns for vulnerable community members

Eighty-five percent of people say they have been able to sleep peacefully in the last month, with no significant changes since the previous round. For the remaining who have felt unsafe, reasons included problems within the host community, weather, and theft. Fear and insecurity also stopped people from going to the market and moving within their neighbourhood during evening hours. Alarming, only half (51%) of those surveyed say women and girls in their family can safely use the latrines at night. This signals a significant deterioration from 90% during the previous round.

**In the last month, have women and girls in your family been able to go out of your shelter/room at night to use the latrine without being afraid?**



A few factors may have contributed to this decline. There was an observed increase in host community concerns around harassment, discrimination, and sexual violence between 2020 and 2021<sup>14</sup>. Women without their own latrines may be more exposed to facilities which are unsafe, far, or unhygienic<sup>15</sup>. Despite two-thirds of households reporting a need for protection services – including on general safety and security, access to justice, and improved safety and security for women and girls in particular – community members found themselves unable to get their issues resolved, or struggled to find the appropriate staff or resources needed due to COVID-19 containment measures<sup>16</sup>.

Enumerators in our quantitative survey observed some discomfort and unease when respondents were asked to clarify fears around using latrines at night, suggesting that this might be linked to overall trend of insecurity in recent months due to theft, clashes between criminal entities, and heightened presence of police and other security personnel. Female FGD participants in Ward 1 were particularly concerned, citing fears around Rohingya committing theft and other crimes, and called on humanitarians to provide more protection.

A number of focus group respondents attributed current problems – including insecurity, crime, lack of livelihoods, and environmental degradation – to the arrival of refugees. The Rohingyas’ willingness to work for less has reportedly driven wages down, while the clearing and fencing of lands has deprived people access to farmlands and natural resources. Others interjected, saying that they would not have had access to aid were it not for Rohingya, and that the NGO presence has improved their communities’ situation.



When relief comes, they make a list of eligible people. They take names and copies of NID cards. But there will be a selection from the list again in their office. And when one of their assistants requests them to cancel or add someone to the list, they do it. Thus, they give ten items to someone and none to another.

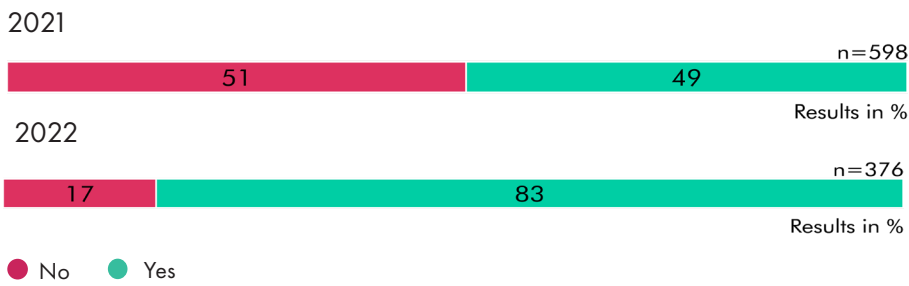
- Male FGD respondent, Ward 2

<sup>14</sup> WFP. 2022. "Refugee Influx Emergency Vulnerability Assessment (REVA 5)".

<sup>15, 16</sup> ISCG and REACH. 2021. "J-MSNA Host Community Factsheet".

A majority of our respondents (83%) say they would approach an aid organisation if fearing for their safety or to report a sensitive issue, marking an increase from last year's survey (49%). Others would prefer consulting relatives (81%), police (42%), or religious leaders (12%).

**If you were afraid for your safety or had a sensitive problem, would you go to a humanitarian organisation to ask for help?**



The vast majority of those surveyed (99%) have not witnessed any threatening or rude behaviour from humanitarian staff, similar to last year's findings. Sixteen percent of people witnessed non-humanitarians extorting someone, and 9% reported having seen aid workers demanding money in exchange for assistance. Food and WASH were the most commonly extorted goods among non-humanitarians, and NFIs among aid workers.



All of these difficulties are actually because our husbands can't earn a living. Rohingya are not harming us with anything, they are eating on their own, and we are on our own. We've had difficulty earning a living in the past as well, but it's also true that there were more job opportunities in the past, and as the population increased, job opportunities decreased.

- Female FGD respondent, Ward 4

# Next Steps

Host communities in Cox's Bazar are calling for their voices to be heard, for safety to improve, and for more information about aid available. They want to trust humanitarians, but for this, informing and listening must go hand-in-hand. In order to address the main issues brought up by host community members, humanitarians should prioritise:

<b>Aid Relevance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure communities know how to access aid to meet their most important needs. Investigate why communities feel distribution of material aid such as food has gotten worse, and how improvements in services such as health and education can be delivered.</li></ul>
<b>Information and transparency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Inform people about humanitarian activities in their community, as knowing how money is spent in their area is important for them.</li></ul>
<b>Participation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Act on recipient feedback, or else inform communities why suggestions could not be implemented, so people feel they can influence the process. Ensure consultations with community representatives and members are carried out regularly throughout implementation, not just at the outset of a programme.</li></ul>
<b>Safety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Understand what can be done to improve safety, particularly of women and girls using WASH facilities at night. Collect further advice from communities about what would improve safety for women in their community at night.</li></ul>
<b>Complaints and feedback mechanisms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Inform communities about what to expect from aid, and how to complain or submit feedback should a service not live up to its promises. Ensure complaint and feedback mechanisms are aligned to community preferences for submitting feedback.</li></ul>

# Methodology

## Survey Design

The sample covers aid receiving host community members around the Rohingya refugee camps, in particular people in Ward number 1, 2, 4, 5 and 6 of Palongkhali Union of Ukhia sub-district in Cox's Bazar, which are located in areas where GTS collected data also in 2021. For the GTS perception survey last year, the host community sample covered the communities that were living nearby camps 2E, 9, 15, 18, and 20, which cover the same geographical areas as the six Wards that were sampled this year.

Overall, the sample was stratified by Ward, with sample sizes based on overall population numbers which were sourced from the Palongkhali Union Parishad population data archive. The population data was prepared in 2019 with the support of SHOUHARDO programme of CARE International. On site level, interviewers used a random-walk approach, whereby they went to each n-th dwelling, n being calculated based on the number of aid recipients in the locations and the sample size. This random walk approach cannot always be implemented in a precise manner since the exact number of aid recipients within the sites is not always known precisely.

The overall target sample size was 400 host community members, while the actual sample size was slightly below target, amounting to 384 people.

The questionnaire was designed in collaboration with REACH, Helvetas and Protyashi, drawing from themes commonly explored by Ground Truth Solutions' perception monitoring work. Interviews were conducted by Protyashi. GTS provided a two-day training on the survey tool for the Protyashi enumerator teams, comprised of 30 (16 female, 14 male) interviewers and team leaders from the Cox's Bazar community. Survey piloting took place between 13 and 14 November 2022, followed by interviews between 15 and 20 November. FGDs were conducted on 28 November.

## Language

Interviews were conducted in the Chittagonian dialect of the Bangla language. Role-play sessions during trainings ensured that enumerators were able to articulate survey questions accurately and in a culturally appropriate manner.

## Weighting

We used design weights to reflect the different sizes of the wards. The design-based weights were raked to marginal totals by gender based on data sourced from the Palongkhali Union Parishad population data archive. The raking step ensures that the survey respondents, when weighted, represent their proper proportions in the population with respect to gender.

## Coverage and Exclusion

All of the selected Wards could be covered and accessed during the data collection.

## Precision of estimates

To calculate margins of error per region we used the package “survey” in R, specifying the exact survey design as outlined above. Note that the precision varies from question to question, sample size per question (as some of the questions are just follow up questions asked to a sub-set of the total sample).

For questions that were asked to all recipients, margins of error between 1 and 5% points (mean: 2.8%, median: 3%).

## Focus Group Discussions

The aim of focus groups was to enable more in-depth analysis of our quantitative data. Using a semi-structured questionnaire, facilitators from Protyashi spoke to 20 men and 28 women across four Wards (1, 2, 4 and 6) in Palongkhali Union. All interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed and translated by Translook.

## Challenges during data collection and limitations

The growing insecurity over free speech was a challenge when asking people to speak freely. Since aid activities in the host community are being coordinated mostly with local representatives, people cannot answer fearlessly the questions related to aid distribution and transparency. It was also a challenge for some respondents to answer perception questions and required additional efforts from interviewers.

Many questions in our survey this year elicited a high number of neutral responses. Enumerator teams partly attributed this to a growing sense of insecurity nationally<sup>17</sup>. Fearing retaliation, people do not want to be seen taking a positive or negative position on many issues.

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<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Watch. 2022. [“Bangladesh: Crackdown on Political Opposition”](#).



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