



COMMUNICATION WITH COMMUNITIES IN BANGLADESH

# Shongjog Multi-Stakeholder Platform Knowledge and Learning Consultative Study

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**Study Team:**

*Shongjog Members (in alphabetic order):* Bijoy Krishna Nath (Head of Risk Reduction and Response, Concern Worldwide), Mrityunjoy Das (Senior Programme Manager, Disaster Management & Climate Change, BRAC), Richard Lacey (Country Director, BBC Media Action)

*CDAC-Network/World Vision UK, DEPP:* Chris Ford (Grants Compliance Officer), Johnathan Napier (Global Programme Manager)

*Partnership Brokers Association:* Bulbul Baksi (External Partnership Broker)

*Data Analysis conducted by:* Arani Chowdhury (Research Assistant) and Hasanul Banna (Research Officer), BBC Media Action

*Report prepared by:* Bulbul Baksi, reviewed and edited by the Study Team members

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Abbreviations	
BDRCS	Bangladesh Red Crescent Society
CDAC-N	Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities Network
CwC	Communicating with Communities
DDM	Department of Disaster Management, Government of Bangladesh
DEPP	Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme
FFM	Flexible Funding Mechanism
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
HCTT	Humanitarian Co-ordination Task Team
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
JNA	Joint Needs Assessment
K&L	Knowledge and Learning
MSP	Multi-Stakeholder Platform
NAHAB	National Alliance of Humanitarian Actors, Bangladesh
SoD	Standing Orders on Disaster
WHO	World Health Organisation

## Summary

The Knowledge and Learning Study for the Shongjog Multi-Stakeholder Platform (MSP)<sup>1</sup> in Bangladesh was conducted by a study team comprising of three Shongjog core group<sup>2</sup> members, who volunteered to take part in the study, two representatives from the global host agency for the Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP), and an external and independent partnership broker of the Partnership Brokers Association. The study was commissioned by the CDAC Network's (CDAC-N) DEPP project. The purpose of the study can be gleaned from two central questions:

*How best can the vision<sup>3</sup> of developing and integrating a comprehensive and inclusive mechanism for genuine two-way communication and information exchange in disaster preparation, response and recovery be achieved in Bangladesh? And, what role is Shongjog playing, or can play in future, in this?*

Twenty-six semi-structured conversations were conducted in March 2017 with broadly three types of stakeholder: sixteen representatives of Shongjog member organisations who have regularly participated in Shongjog meetings and activities; eight Country Directors or senior management representatives of Shongjog member organisations; and five stakeholders who were not Shongjog members but have a stake in humanitarian activities or two-way Communication with Communities (CwC). A few meetings were held jointly with senior representatives and participating representatives, i.e. representatives who regularly engage with Shongjog, of member organisations.

## Insights from Conversations

This section is organised in four sub-sections in the report: Achievements of Shongjog; Gaps, Challenges and Opportunities; Challenges of Collaborative Governance; Thoughts on the Future of Shongjog.

### *Achievements of Shongjog*

*“One of the key achievements was securing the engagement of stakeholders who wouldn’t otherwise engage with Communication with Communities (CwC)”*, said one Shongjog member. Most members indicated that the collaborative experience was significant, and it added value to personal and professional learning. Significant number of members also noted that CwC has gained recognition as an issue, and is being increasingly discussed in the different clusters. During recent crises, the Department for Disaster Management (DDM) of the Government of Bangladesh and the Health Cluster have engaged in systematic messaging and thereby sought to treat information as aid. The participation and active engagement of the Government in Shongjog, through a Deputy Director and an officer of the DDM, is also considered an achievement by members and a few external stakeholders. Shongjog has been invited to contribute to a revision of the government's national Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD), which indicates recognition of the significance of CwC and of Shongjog as an entity. Shongjog training, funded by the DEPP, has created a body of trained personnel who can now be deployed for two-way communication with communities in the management of disasters. Shongjog also facilitated collaborative action among a few member organisations for preparing CwC plans during Cyclone Roanu. However, concrete coordinated response actions for CwC are yet to take place, which has affected the visibility of the platform.

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<sup>1</sup>Please refer to ‘Introduction’ on page 6 for information on Shongjog’s formation; to Box 1 on page 8 and Box 2 on page 10 for Vision and Role and Functions of Shongjog.

<sup>2</sup>As per Shongjog’s governance system, the ‘core group’ is the key decision-making unit of the platform

<sup>3</sup>Box 1 on page 8

A significant number of member organisations reported specific changes in their organisations to increase focus on CwC since being associated with Shongjog. Examples include the revision of communication materials, aligning organisational systems to focus on CwC, taking on new CwC projects, including CwC in training programmes, being more intentional and systematic in using information as aid during disasters, and consulting communities more meticulously for planning relief operations and packages. It has also triggered new collaborations, both formal and informal, which have been additional unexpected benefits of the collaboration. These achievements have been largely credited to individual champions among Shongjog's members, rather than to organisational buy-in or to co-ordinated action among members.

### *Gaps, Challenges and Opportunities*

One of the key challenges of Shongjog seems to be that it has not yet gained enough visibility or influence among stakeholder groups beyond its participating members, which is necessary to change policy and practice on a wider scale. Shongjog has focused on awareness and capacity development so far, and has not yet laid down systems for co-ordinated action for CwC in disaster management. A few member organisations, especially senior representatives of International Non-government Organisations (INGOs), have questioned the added value of the platform either on grounds that CwC is an old concept that is already integrated in their practices, or that the platform has not gained visibility as a multi-stakeholder entity and is largely identified as a project of the host agency. A couple of agencies cited resource constraints as the key barrier in the humanitarian sector, which precludes meaningful consultations with communities. Most conversations reflected that Shongjog needs more visibility through clear messaging, should engage in strategic discussions based on hard hitting evidence of gaps in CwC, and move from the 'what' to the 'how' to gain higher levels of operational influence. An absence of local actors from the platform and the inability to engage key external stakeholders, such as the media and information wings of different government departments, in any significant way so far were raised as significant limitations in several conversations.

Most member representatives, with a few exceptions, consider these challenges a part of the journey, which only began 18 months ago, and some external stakeholders appreciated that Shongjog has brought the CwC agenda into focus. However, a couple of members and several senior representatives of member organisations were more critical of the opportunities missed.

A few of the missed opportunities gleaned from conversations, which can still be pursued, are:

- The Emergency Message Library, which is complete but needs the final endorsement of the DDM<sup>4</sup>, can be a concrete output and serve as a basis for more coordinated action.
- Shongjog branding can be strengthened by introducing a few simple communication guidelines, such as use of a Shongjog email ID by the Secretariat.
- Regular, brief updates to senior management can trigger their interest in specific activities.
- Engaging in more formal and informal conversations with senior representatives of member and stakeholder organisations can trigger new activities with their active engagement and resource commitment.

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing the Message Library is now formally endorsed. This was issued by the DDM a few weeks after the conversations took place.

### *Challenges of Collaborative Governance*

*“Definitely collaboration is required... but what does collaboration mean? Is it everyone doing everything together, or some people taking lead on specific activities? It should be defined from the start”*, said a Shongjog member, and echoed quite strongly among several other participating member representatives. Collaborative governance was found to be a difficult experience, though a necessary one. They felt that the collaborative processes could have been better managed, but differed in their opinions on where the responsibility rested. Conversations with members reflected both excitement about the dynamic collaborative processes and disaffection with the protracted negotiations and over-consultation on some occasions.

Challenges with leadership was another major concern. Where does the leadership of the platform rest? The TOR seemed to indicate that it rested with the ‘core group’ headed by the Chair, with the Secretariat playing a supporting role to help the Chair co-ordinate the platform. The DEPP project originally conceptualised a partnership management role for the Project Manager, who is one of two members of the Shongjog Secretariat. Such a role has implications for experience, skill set, resource allocation for manpower and authority. A question to consider may be: how far were the assumptions about the role of the Secretariat discussed and reviewed throughout the period either in DEPP or in Shongjog? There were diverse expectations and perceptions of the role of the Secretariat, the ‘core group’, the Chair and the members in general. There was both a frustration that members were not coming forward to take leadership responsibilities, and a complaint that expectations from members and the specific aims and added value of the platform were not clear enough. This probably raises a larger question on the role of secretariats in such multi-agency collaborations: can it undertake the partnership management function entirely on its own?

A key challenge was the commitment of resources, such as staff time, for the platform or for CwC, by member organisations. One of the members put it as - organisational leaders gave assent to the formation of the platform, but did not commit resources. Shongjog has been grappling with the challenge of engaging leaders with strategic influence in its activities.

In this context, it fell upon the host agency, BBC Media Action, which hosts the DEPP project and the Secretariat, to carry responsibilities for coordinating activities, managing the collaboration, and being, to a large extent, the external face of the platform. BBC Media Action also provided thought leadership to Shongjog as CwC is one of its key domain areas. Media Action's role was both appreciated for helping the platform journey so far, and criticised as the strong association hindered the emergence of an independent identity for the platform.

Despite these challenges, instances of collaborative leadership slowly emerging were reported by stakeholders. Individual champions collaborated on thematic areas for design and implementation of the DEPP-funded Shongjog projects, and there were examples of collaborative action during Cyclone Roanu. Yet, transferring the baton of Shongjog leadership, where different partners take initiative and leadership for different areas of work, is yet to take place in a way that can ensure sustainability of the outcomes of the platform or carry its agenda forward.

### *Thoughts on Future of Shongjog*

Shongjog grew out of the Bangladesh CwC in Emergencies Working Group, which was chaired by a Government representative and co-convened by UNICEF and BBC Media Action. However, in its present form, Shongjog was initiated through a workshop in June-July 2015, supported by the DEPP, which also supports its two-member Secretariat. The DEPP comes to the end of its first phase in September 2017, and so the support to the Secretariat and to the projects currently undertaken by

Shongjog, will cease. In this context the future of Shongjog, which is tied to the future of CwC in Bangladesh, emerges as a critical concern.

Participating member representatives, who see value in CwC, expressed that Shongjog should continue as it is still too early to achieve its ambitious vision; but, requiring a Secretariat, it should therefore look for alternative funding. One or two members have also suggested rotating the Secretariat function. Some stakeholders also thought that the CwC agenda is so critical for the humanitarian sector, and so prone to being appropriated, that it needs an unaligned entity like Shongjog to carry it forward. However, senior members of a significant number of INGOs felt that the agenda could easily be transitioned to the INGO Emergencies Sub-committee.

The future of Shongjog seems to be tied to the identification of new funding opportunities and the emergence of shared leadership to take it forward. Alternatively, the agenda could be taken up by an existing body such as the Humanitarian Co-ordination Task Team (HCTT) in Bangladesh or the INGO Emergencies Sub-Committee. A member commented that Shongjog may then survive, but would it remain independent?

## 1. Introduction

The Shongjog multi-stakeholder platform (MSP) was formed in June 2015 by a group of NGOs and UN agencies alongside the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) and the Department of Disaster Management (DDM) of the Government of Bangladesh<sup>5</sup>. They gathered at a workshop in Dhaka, convened by BBC Media Action as the host of CDAC Network's Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP). They decided to form a multi-stakeholder platform called Shongjog, to change policy and practice towards making Communicating with Communities (CwC) an integral part of disaster preparedness, response and post disaster reconstruction and rehabilitation in Bangladesh. The Shongjog MSP builds on previous initiatives undertaken in this area, including the work of the Bangladesh CwC in Emergencies Working Group, which was replaced by Shongjog. The members wanted to form an unaligned, independent and a non-hierarchical entity.

In June 2016, a Knowledge and Learning (K&L) workshop was held to reflect on and make recommendations to enhance Shongjog's operational effectiveness and efficiency. A key action point from the workshop was that the MSP should shift its focus away from governance concerns to programme activities. Between June 2016 and March 2017, Shongjog commissioned seven CwC projects that were co-designed and implemented by its members. They are financed through the CDAC Network DEPP Flexible Funding Mechanism (FFM), and the projects are on-going. In addition to the FFM portfolio of CwC projects, several organisations, encouraged and inspired by their engagement in the Shongjog MSP, have independently designed and are now implementing CwC-related projects.

## 2. Purpose and Methodology of Knowledge and Learning Consultations

Considering these significant events and experiences, it was thought timely and opportune for the MSP and the CDAC-N DEPP project to reflect together on the advances and achievements, especially since the last K&L event in June 2016; of Shongjog, and to identify further opportunities and challenges that might be addressed. The central questions were:

*How best can the vision of developing and integrating a comprehensive and inclusive mechanism for genuine two-way communication and information exchange in disaster preparation, response and recovery be achieved in Bangladesh? And, what role is Shongjog playing, or can play in future, in this?*

The study had two other purposes: to collect and document evidence on the collaborative experience of Shongjog for the broader learning agenda of the DEPP - which has been designed on the premise that collaborative action is necessary for influencing humanitarian practices; and to generate information for the theory of change indicators of the CDAC-N DEPP project being hosted by World Vision UK at the global level and by BBC Media Action in Bangladesh.

The study was designed and conducted by a study team comprising three Shongjog members, two representatives of the global host of the CDAC-N DEPP project and an external partnership broker from the Partnership Brokers Association (PBA). The study was funded by the DEPP project. The external partnership broker from PBA is aligned with the partnership, but not with any specific organisation, and led the study process. The design was participatory, with inputs from all study team members.

A methodology based on individual semi-structured conversations, face-to-face or over Skype, was used to conduct the consultation. The conversations were conducted by the PBA partnership broker,

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<sup>5</sup> **Current Shongjog-MSP Members:** Department of Disaster Management (Chair), Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS), BRAC, Action Against Hunger (ACF), Plan International, Save the Children International Bangladesh, Handicap International, ICCO Cooperation, BBC Media Action, Concern Worldwide, International Organisation for Migration (IOM), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Christian Aid, Action Aid Bangladesh, World Vision Bangladesh, CARE International. Practical Action, Muslim Aid, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).



DEPP representatives, and a couple of interviews were conducted by Shongjog members. This skewed representation in the interview team was due to time constraints of Shongjog members, who are balancing several commitments while attending to Shongjog's development.

A broad cross section of Shongjog MSP stakeholders was engaged in the consultation, representing diverse interests and opinions. There were twenty-six conversations, and broadly three types of stakeholder consulted: sixteen representatives of Shongjog member organisations who regularly participated in Shongjog meetings and activities; eight Country Directors or senior management representatives of Shongjog member organisations, who are not involved in Shongjog activities on a day-to-day basis; and five stakeholders, who are not Shongjog members but have a stake in humanitarian activities or CwC. The content analysis of the conversations was undertaken by BBC Media Action's Bangladesh research team who did not engage in the conversations and so could make a relatively neutral analysis of the content. The report was prepared by the external partnership broker and reviewed and edited by the study team.

### 3. Insights from the Conversations

The following insights have been generated through a synthesis of the twenty-six conversations. The key questions that served as the lens to analyse and synthesise responses are: a) what do the responses mean for the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and added value of the Shongjog MSP? b) what opportunities, challenges or missed opportunities do they indicate? And c) do they indicate an option for the future strategic direction of the platform? An attempt has been made to reflect the diversities in responses, so that the patterns as well as the differences are explicit. A few questions have been raised for reflection using the partnership management lens. The insights have been organised around four specific themes:

1. Achievements of Shongjog
2. Gaps, Challenges and Opportunities
3. Challenges of Collaborative Governance
4. Options for Shongjog's future

#### 3.1 Achievements of Shongjog

The perceptions of Shongjog's achievements have been organised based on three key parameters:

- The collaborative experience
- Outcomes of CwC promotion at the level of public policy
- Outcomes of CwC promotion at the level of individual organisations

##### 3.1.1 The collaborative experience:

Most members said that joint learning and sharing through Shongjog had personal and professional value. The collaborative platform was perceived as supportive of humanitarian actors wanting to promote CwC, and the involvement of the Government in Shongjog through the DDM was acknowledged as an achievement by all members. There were one or two significant voices that claimed that the initial enthusiasm in the platform dwindled due to management challenges. Some members felt that concrete outcomes were yet to be realised and were relying on the FFM-funded projects to deliver them. Several others outlined specific achievements to be discussed in subsequent paragraphs.

*"One of the key achievements was getting the engagement of stakeholders who wouldn't otherwise engage with CwC"*

Shongjog member and UN agency representative

*"I am a relatively junior person in the organisation, but I can send a text message to any senior member of Shongjog and they call back. We seek their inputs on our programmes, so several brains now work for our programmes"*

Shongjog member, national organisation

Some member organisations reported new collaborations emerging because of their association with Shongjog. Some of these collaborations are informal but significant and are helping to transcend organisational and hierarchical boundaries. Examples include instances of increased contact and collaboration between a few INGOs and the DDM; generation of new partnerships, formalised in working arrangements; revision of communication

materials by an INGO to make them more interactive with professional assistance from a technical agency involved in Shongjog; and the establishment of closer contact with the DDM through Shongjog, which helped an INGO to conduct a humanitarian assessment in four districts. There have been instances of joint proposals among two or more organisations for donor funded projects.

However, collaboration was not without its challenges, as will be discussed in the two following sections on 'Gaps, Challenges and Opportunities', and 'Challenges of Collaborative Governance'.

**Box 1: Vision of the Shongjog MSP**

"Maximise the abilities of both communities and organisations - based on an analysis of hazards - to prepare for, respond to and recover from disasters by developing a comprehensive and inclusive mechanism for genuine two-way communication and information exchange.

To achieve this, we need to-

- Identify credible sources of information, and ensure that information is preserved, analysed updated and acted upon.
- Create and promote trust between communities, multi-stakeholder platform and other platforms for effective communication with communities.
- Commit to recognising community voices by reflecting them in strategies, policies and decision-making processes. We also need closed feedback loops so that communities are aware of this commitment and the way information is used.
- Use appropriate, inclusive and diverse channels of communication to reach all groups, especially those who are most affected by disaster, and including the most vulnerable and those with special needs, such as children, women and girls, elderly, widows, persons with disabilities and socially excluded groups."

**3.1.2 Outcomes for promotion of CwC at the level of public policy:**

The invitation for Shongjog to contribute to the national revision of the Government of Bangladesh's Standing Orders on Disaster (SOD) has provided an opportunity for the inclusion of CwC in public policy on Disaster Management. The fact that Shongjog has been invited by the Humanitarian Coordination Task Team (HCTT) to contribute is perceived by almost all members as a significant outcome for CwC. It now features in discussions at HCTT level, which are either initiated by Shongjog members in the clusters or through invitations to Shongjog to contribute on CwC related issues.

There have been a few examples of Government initiated actions. DDM representatives are mobilising their local level teams and have included two-way communication in their training modules. Reflective of the CwC approach, a community member was also asked to give a speech during National Disaster Preparedness Day.

*"CwC has gained recognition as an issue, though it has not become a priority yet"*

Shongjog member and NGO representative

In an example of donor action, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) asked partners involved in the ongoing humanitarian response in Cox's Bazar to streamline CwC.

A few Shongjog members co-ordinated inputs to develop an action plan and joint funding proposal on CwC during Cyclone Roanu in May/June 2016, which was then included in the Joint Needs Assessment (JNA). While this was perceived as an achievement by some members, there were others who felt that additional efforts to communicate with communities during Roanu had limited value because these plans could not attract adequate resources, and therefore could not be implemented.

During flooding in north-western districts<sup>6</sup> in August 2016, the Health Cluster and DDM engaged in systematic messaging, acknowledging that information is a form of aid. This may not have been two-way communication, but was nevertheless a significant achievement as systematic information dissemination was made a component of aid.

### *3.1.3 Outcomes for promotion of CwC at the level of individual organisations:*

A significant number of member organisations reported distinct organisational benefits due to their association with Shongjog, and some of these benefits were a testimony to CwC gradually gaining significance and contributing to changes in organisational practices. Respondents noted that this progress generally relied on the drive and acumen of individual CwC champions among Shongjog members to make headway in their organisations, and that it did not necessarily translate into organisational buy-in for Shongjog. To some members, a lack of visibility of the platform and governance challenges served as barriers to greater advocacy for Shongjog and CwC within large organisations. A few INGO members also said that participation in Shongjog did not add value to their organisations because the aims and potential for added value were not clear. The critique is discussed in the next section on 'Gaps, Challenges and Opportunities'.

A key organisational benefit noted by several respondents was the training of humanitarian staff on CwC through the DEPP-funded Shongjog capacity building project. This has created a body of trained personnel at strategic and local levels, who can bring about changes in practice.

Instances of other specific organisational benefits resulting from association with Shongjog highlighted during the conversations include:

1. A significant number of members said that they had gained greater clarity about the concept of CwC. As a result, acceptance of CwC as a concept among organisations has increased. One of the members specifically said that this has led to direct consultations with communities during disasters through community volunteers. Another member representative reported that their organisation's humanitarian programming had become more needs-based with a greater attention to detail. For example, a Shongjog member organisation led consultations in their project area to plan for the disposal of sanitary napkins during floods involving municipal authorities.
2. A few organisations reported that information is more systematically being used as a form of aid, with information being sourced from the Information Bureau of the Department of Agriculture, the Government of Bangladesh, WHO and other resource agencies.
3. A couple of organisations reported that new projects are making specific reference to CwC, internal systems are being created to support it, and local teams are beginning to use CwC.
4. CwC training led a couple of member organisations to revise their approaches adopted in different programmes, such as in post-Roanu aid programmes. One member referred to revision of reporting formats to take account of CwC. It is now also included in organisational training programmes, where trained Shongjog members serve as resource persons.

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<sup>6</sup> Jamalpur, Kurigram, Sirajgonj, Tangail and Gaibandha

5. A couple of members reported that their organisations had started to revisit their communication strategies, and were trying to make them more participatory and two-way. In one member organisation, a project-based complaints mechanism has now further evolved into a central programme support mechanism that cuts across all programmes. In a couple of member organisations, CwC has gained priority since their association with Shongjog even though communication is not a primary focus area for them.

Aside from the above examples, the Shongjog projects funded by the DEPP FFM reportedly provided further impetus to organisational changes and to producing concrete outputs for CwC.

### 3.2 Gaps, Challenges and Opportunities

This section will focus on gaps, challenges and missed opportunities. It will also indicate opportunities that Shongjog can leverage now. Shongjog's internal challenges, such as governance barriers, will be discussed in the next section on 'Challenges of Collaborative Governance'.

The discussions in this section are divided into two sub-sections:

- Challenges and gaps in promoting CwC through Shongjog
- Opportunities for Shongjog

#### **Box 2: Role and Functions of Shongjog:**

"The CwC multi-stakeholder platform should be a strong national network/working group of appropriate Governments, U.N., BDRCS, international, national and local NGOs and other relevant organizations, which will collaborate with communities to provide strategic directions to embed CwC in policy, strategy and implementation of humanitarian programmes. It should function for as long as it is required or determined by its members to ensure that coordinated communication with communities is an integral part of humanitarian response. It should secure official recognition and endorsement to ensure its sustainability and influence.

Its key roles should be to:

- Coordinate among members and with other stakeholders including humanitarian architecture on CwC and build capacities to ensure consistent and coordinated communication to prepare for, respond to and recover from disaster or the hazards thereof.
- Advocate and advise stakeholders, including private sector agencies and media, to influence CwC related practices, products and processes
- Facilitate implementation through recognised entities including government, non-government institutions and statutory bodies/programme to facilitate utilization of resources that currently exist and are appropriate.
- Ensure that messages and information are updated, consistent, relevant and accurate as well as developing a database for agencies to obtain information.
- Ensure that CwC is institutionalized by actively engaging with government to incorporate objectives of MSP in SOD."

*Source: Shongjog Terms of Reference*

#### 3.2.1 Challenges and Gaps in promoting CwC through Shongjog

A significant number of senior level representatives of Shongjog member organisations, including Government and INGOs, said that they knew about Shongjog but were not clear about its aim or its identity as a multi-stakeholder platform. A significant percentage of the senior representatives of INGOs spoken to considered two-way communication with communities an integral part of humanitarian work, and believed that they were already practising it. And a significant proportion of Country Directors of INGOs spoken to questioned the need for a distinct platform to advocate for CwC; an existing platform, such as the INGO Emergencies sub-committee, they said, could take up the agenda to keep the discourse alive.

One of the challenges that some Shongjog members pointed out was that advocacy for CwC requires engagement at a higher and more strategic level of influence and should incorporate hard-hitting

evidence on the gaps in current humanitarian practice; Shongjog has yet to get this right. A member said that with competing concepts such as ‘Communication for Development’ (C4D) also being advocated within organisations, **Shongjog needs to carefully position CwC as a distinct area of practice that is significant for organisations.**

Some members perceived **resource constraints** to be the main challenge. Unless these are addressed, CwC will remain an elusive concept. One of the members cited examples from the Roanu response: community needs were assessed more systematically than before, but the relief packages were so starkly inadequate that these were reduced to a form of tokenism. Other sources of assistance are limited in local situations, where infrastructure is inadequate. So, CwC, in this context, becomes more of a rhetoric.

Box 3 refers to a framework on how partnering influences change processes, developed by Simon Zadek. At Level 1, Shongjog focused on generating awareness rather than designing practical mechanisms for collaborative action. Therefore, visibility of its outcomes and opportunities for breakthrough results were still limited. A prominent actor in the HCTT said that Shongjog should now develop a co-ordinated plan for member organisations to work on throughout the year. Unless there is ground-level co-ordination, activities will remain at the level of awareness-raising and

*“Every response we make adheres to standard accountability procedures. There is a grievance redressal system that communities can access. Relief is entirely based on community needs assessment”*

*“Consulting with communities is the core of our work. What are the gaps that Shongjog is trying to address? There is no clarity on where they are trying to add value”*

Two INGO Country Directors on Shongjog and CwC:

Shongjog will lose its momentum. Nevertheless, some of the Shongjog projects have led to influence at Level 2 because individual member organisations have started to evolve their practices by aligning them more closely with CwC. Many members consider this a noteworthy achievement in this short period of time. **However, the challenge is to address Level 3 to fulfil Shongjog’s vision. It will entail challenging the status quo, making use of evidence on gaps in CwC, and taking the discussions to a more strategic level.**

**Box 3: Levels of influence through partnering, adopted from Simon Zadek**

<b>LEVEL 3</b>	<b>CHANGING POLICY &amp; PRACTICE</b>	In due course, even the smallest partnerships can provide the evidence and inspiration for new policies and can lead to a significant change in the ‘rules’- they become <b>transformational</b>
<b>LEVEL 2</b>	<b>INFLUENCING INDIVIDUALS, ORGANISATIONS &amp; SYSTEMS</b>	However, ‘Level 1’ projects when they work well inevitably impact and <b>influence</b> more widely and deeply
<b>LEVEL 1</b>	<b>PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS TO CHALLENGES</b>	Most partnerships operate at this <b>practical</b> level as grass roots, co-created and delivered collaborative projects

The inability so far to reach out to **local actors**, by and large, is seen by many, both members and external stakeholders, to be a huge gap and a missed opportunity. **For meaningful change this has been recommended for prioritisation.** The challenge, as Shongjog members suggest, is that there is no representative body of national NGOs that they can reach out to for engagement with Shongjog. A few respondents, who were either active Shongjog members or senior representatives of member organisations, mentioned NAHAB, a newly formed national NGO forum, which could serve as a starting point to make this connection. One of the INGO members of Shongjog was supporting it to give shape to the newly formed entity.

### 3.2.2 Opportunities for Shongjog

Several conversations highlighted missed opportunities for Shongjog. While many of these opportunities are open and can still be leveraged, some have passed. The inability to capitalise on certain opportunities was a source of regret for several members. Examples are:

- i. The 'CwC Gap Analysis study' commissioned in 2015 was intended to produce the evidence of gaps in policy and practice that could be used to advocate for CwC. However, the study did not produce strong enough evidence on the gaps to enable Shongjog to make a case for CwC with the more sceptical stakeholders and members. A task force was formed to oversee the study, but there were diverse opinions on the extent to which the study process and finalisation of its outputs were accountable to the task force.
- ii. One of the members pointed out the lack of in-country representation in the DEPP project design team. Therefore, it missed out on adapting the project to address specific in-country needs on communication with communities. This opinion has been contested on grounds that there were processes for consulting in-country stakeholders, and there was enough flexibility in the programme to adapt to local needs.

The following opportunities **remain open and have been emphasised as possibilities that can add significant value to Shongjog, if pursued:**

- i. The 'Message Library', which was created before Shongjog, still requires sign off by the DDM<sup>77</sup>. It was mentioned by a member as an output that could have been the basis of coordinated action for CwC. **This remains a potential quick win.**
- ii. Shongjog projects funded by the DEPP FFM are generally referred to in communications (emails, meetings etc.) as 'DEPP projects', and are therefore identified with the DEPP and BBC Media Action. **Referring to the projects as 'Shongjog projects' with a shift in the language to better promote the Shongjog brand can be easily achieved.**
- iii. A member felt that the **Shongjog website** was not used enough to promote the brand. A couple of members expressed some misgivings about the way it was created. **How can it be used to increase Shongjog's visibility?**
- iv. There were **potential partners** who have been left out so far. They could have increased the reach of the platform – **local NGOs, media, information wings of different Government Departments.**
- v. A majority of senior management representatives of member organisations as well as external stakeholders wanted **brief regular updates from Shongjog** on its activities.
- vi. **Consulting communities during disaster**, securing authentic information on communities' needs **within a brief time frame or verifying them during disaster** are concerns that Shongjog may seek to address.
- vii. **Localisation of early warning messages** so that communities can easily understand them is a challenge that the Government is exploring right now. This is very well aligned with Shongjog's agenda.

### 3.3 Challenges of Collaborative Governance

This section will mainly deal with the internal governance challenges of Shongjog, some of which have impacted upon its visibility. The perceptions and opinions have been treated under three sub-sections:

- Governance challenges of Shongjog
- Challenges of collaborative leadership
- Role of the Secretariat.

<sup>77</sup> The Message Library has been officially endorsed by the DDM since the time that the conversations took place.



### 3.3.1 Governance Challenges of Shongjog

Shongjog members expressed both the need for collaboration and disaffection with the protracted and often clumsy consultative processes. Governance challenges were a significant part of the discussions at the Knowledge and Learning workshop in June 2016; members present at the workshop took some strategic decisions to better manage the decision-making processes, though it was not clear from the conversations how far these decisions were followed up. Key members of Shongjog, who engaged actively in shaping the platform so far, expressed similar concerns and disaffection during the study consultations.

*“Definitely collaboration is required...but what does collaboration mean? Is it everyone doing everything together, or some people taking the lead on certain activities? We need to define collaboration from the start”*

Shongjog Member

*“Collaboration is still the best way to achieve our aims”*

*“...collaboration is both important and challenging... how to get each partner on the same platform”*

*“It almost makes me question- did we need the visioning and all that jazz that got people enthused, and then we spent time debating things, which frustrated people?”*

Quotes from some active Shongjog members:

During the conversations, members were asked what could have been done differently. Several members said that there should have been more definitive discussions on what collaboration entails, and more clarity on how decision-making processes and operations could be made efficient as well as collaborative. One or two members questioned the need for investing in up-front processes to form the platform, which generated enthusiasm, but also raised expectations, and it then became difficult to channel the process efficiently. They also acknowledged that it is difficult to say whether there were alternative options that could have served the purpose better. One of the key members, who found the collaborative process difficult, said that securing services of an ‘external partnership broker’ for specific workshops was useful in making the process less difficult, but it remained challenging.

A few members said that there were too many consultations, in the form of meetings and workshops, and some of them, such as discussions on website design, need not have been general consultations with all members because they dealt with very

specific issues. On the other hand, one of the members said that the website design process was too directive and did not leave enough scope for original ideas and creativity of Shongjog members. Thus, there was both disaffection with an overly-consultative approach, and frustration that some processes have not been collaborative enough. From the point of view partnership management, these misgivings may indicate a necessity to invest in reaching a common understanding among partners on what partnering entails. The need to ‘define’ what partnering entails has been voiced quite strongly in a significant number of conversations. Diverse expectations and perceptions are also an integral part of the partnering process, and they require intentional and systematic management. **It may be worth reflecting – how much investment in time and efforts for strengthening capacities to partner is required to enable partnerships optimise their value for the partners and for the projects they deliver.**

There was at least one significant voice that said that things may have been different if the Shongjog projects had been commissioned earlier, because they led to actions. It may be worthy of reflection **why the projects took so long to be commissioned** – the contracting process took several months even after the designs were prepared. **From a partnership management perspective, one of the most common challenges overlooked in partnerships is that of navigating internal organisational systems.**

### 3.3.2 Challenges of Collaborative Leadership

Collaborative leadership entails partners leading on aspects they are best suited to. This seemed to emerge during the process of designing the DEPP-funded Shongjog projects through which thematic groups were formed to draw up potential project ideas with leadership provided by the members considered best placed to do so. Members involved in the process have invariably mentioned it as a rewarding experience. Among the approved projects, two are being collaboratively undertaken by more than one Shongjog member, and at least four projects received significant inputs from multiple members. So, leadership was shared both during design and, now, in the implementation of the projects.

There was another instance of collaborative leadership during Cyclone Roanu, when a few Shongjog members contributed to preparing a coordinated action plan and developed a joint funding proposal to resource CwC response activities. Unfortunately, adequate resources could not be mobilised for collaborative action, which might have provided more scope for collaborative leadership to emerge.

There were also champions who advocated CwC within their own organisations. Some of these champions saw opportunities in the Shongjog projects funded by DEPP FFM to push their own organisations towards change.

*“There was no collaboration when it came to taking responsibilities”*

*“The vision could not be transmitted to members, and they were unclear about what was expected from them”*

Quotes from two Shongjog members

Aside from the above examples, the perception among a significant number of senior representatives of member organisations and a few of the participating members is that there was a ‘governance vacuum’, quoting an INGO Country Director. To several senior management representatives and external stakeholders, Shongjog is overly associated with BBC Media Action. This, according to them, hindered its establishment as an independent entity. In some instances, stakeholders have engaged more with BBC Media Action on CwC, than with Shongjog. Though

they appreciated the leadership provided by BBC Media Action, it also meant that the platform had limited visibility as a distinct entity.

However, several member representatives who participated in day-to-day Shongjog activities acknowledged and appreciated the thought leadership provided by BBC Media Action and said it would take time for collaborative leadership to emerge. They also mentioned that BBC Media Action did not attempt to promote themselves, and have instead tried to hand over the baton to other members on several occasions. The same phenomenon, a couple of members said, is also observed in the cluster system. The lead agency in each cluster shoulders responsibility for the cluster and is strongly identified with the respective cluster. Some members expressed frustration with the lack of initiative among members to take responsibilities. On the other hand, there were voices that said that lack of clarity on expectations from members prevented their active involvement.

One Shongjog member had an interesting perspective on disengagement among organisational leaders: *“collaboration is necessary, but it precludes involvement of senior management because they do not have the time to collaborate”*. Though a few Country Directors acknowledged that association with Shongjog led to significant unanticipated benefits to their organisations, they admitted that they had not been personally involved nor did they know about the overall activities of Shongjog.



### 3.3.3 Role of Secretariat

BBC Media Action is the host of the DEPP project in Bangladesh. The project has provided financial support to a two-member Secretariat for two years. The Secretariat comprises a Project Manager and a Project Coordinator and is hosted by BBC Media Action on behalf of Shongjog and the DEPP. The Shongjog terms of reference underscore that the Secretariat should coordinate with the Chair and defines its responsibilities as mainly supportive (See Box 4). The DEPP project envisaged a partnership management role for the Secretariat, in addition to co-ordination and secretarial functions. The Secretariat had<sup>8</sup> two persons, but conversations focused mostly on the Project Manager, who seemed to be the visible face of the Secretariat.

**Box 4: Responsibilities of the Secretariat as per the Shongjog terms of reference:**

- Support the core group to organise meetings and facilities (rooms, conference call facilities etc.) in collaboration with the Chair
- Disseminate final meeting minutes and propose a draft agenda for the next meeting in collaboration with the Chair.
- Support the preparation of regular progress reports on the strategic plan, annual activities and expenditure to the Core Group and General Members especially during funded project.
- Keep and maintain records online and off-line, at a minimum updating the membership list and uploading meeting minutes and progress reports online.
- Act as key contact in case of any queries about the MSP
- Support MSP for disaster response on CwC when necessary
- Other supporting functions as appropriate and agreed by both the Secretariat and core group in advance

Since the Secretariat was the only unit with dedicated staff for Shongjog, it seems important to discuss the significance of its role. Reflections on the role of the Secretariat were limited in the conversations. Members either referred to the dynamism of the Project Manager and his role as an animator for the platform, or were critical of the way the Secretariat managed the tasks and the collaborative processes. The purpose here is to move beyond the individual to a reflection on what the role of the Secretariat entailed. The reflections shared here are largely based on clues derived from different sections of the conversations, synthesized using a partnership management framework. From the Project Manager's point of view, the workload, which combined multiple roles and tasks of supporting, co-ordinating, shaping and managing, was huge, especially in a context where members did not commit resources in terms of staff time to the platform. As a result, it was quite impossible to attend to both processes and outputs. From a partnership management perspective, the role envisaged by Shongjog - which was mainly a supportive role, and that envisaged by DEPP - which included a partnership management role, were not aligned. This led to confusion about who carried the key responsibility for managing the collaboration. Was it the responsibility of the Chair, or of the core group? Or the Secretariat? **What was the impact of this indistinct role delineation on Shongjog processes? A question to reflect on is: what kind of inputs, skills, authority and enablers does partnership management require? How far is it possible for a single individual or a single entity to carry the role? How can the partners be encouraged to step up to share partnership management and leadership role?**

The Project Manager seems to have been perceived by members as a representative of BBC Media Action, rather than part of a Secretariat strongly aligned with and accountable to Shongjog. For them, it reinforced the perception that Shongjog was principally the responsibility of BBC Media Action. This perception seems to have resonated with a few external stakeholders as well, and one of them recommended that the Secretariat should have a Shongjog email ID. **This also raises the**

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<sup>8</sup> The two main members of the Secretariat who supported it so far had both left their jobs before or during the study.

**question: what should be the relationship between a host agency and the Secretariat, and where should the Secretariat sit? How does this impact upon the collaborative process?**

### 3.4 Future of Shongjog

There were two distinct strands of opinion on the future of Shongjog. Members of Shongjog as well as external stakeholders who supported CwC invariably said that it should continue beyond September 2017 when the DEPP funding comes to an end. Members and stakeholders who thought that CwC was a relatively old concept and offered little additional benefits to organisations felt that there was no need for a separate entity and it could be part of an existing forum, such as the INGO Emergencies Sub-committee.

A majority of participating members and a significant number of the stakeholders consulted wanted Shongjog to continue and made the following points:

- It has only been 18 months, which was not sufficient time to achieve the purpose for which it was created.
- Changing practices to include communities in disaster management is difficult. It should be based on evidence of gaps in current policy and practice, and therefore should be a focused agenda. It will be diluted if it is taken over by another entity with multiple agendas.
- Shongjog members are currently implementing several projects, which are treading challenging domains. Due to tight timelines and other competing priorities these projects may find it challenging to deliver all activities within the time available. The commissioning of the projects was delayed due to bureaucratic challenges of respective organisations. The achievements of Shongjog depend on these projects to a large extent.
- Since CwC requires challenging and changing core practices of organisations, it requires an independent and unaligned multi-stakeholder agency, where diverse interests will ensure that it is not dominated by any one sector or group.

Most people who subscribed to these views also felt that Shongjog needed a secretariat and therefore it was necessary to identify funding to sustain one. A few members, however, felt that the Secretariat could be rotated and therefore might exist without further funding.

A relatively smaller number of members and a significant proportion of the senior representatives of organisations who wanted Shongjog's agenda adopted by another entity, said:

- The value of Shongjog and CwC was not clear, and organisations would be unable to engage with it in the next phase unless there was a clear definition of its relevance.
- There were too many forums in Bangladesh, and 30-40% of the time of senior staff was taken up coordinating with these forums. Yet another addition would further fragment their attention, and so its interests can be best served by an existing entity working in the humanitarian sector.
- There was a leadership gap in Shongjog. An option for future continuity is for the DDM to drive it. However, the question remains whether the Government is best placed to lead a complex partnership entity. Its role might be to support it as a lead member to enable policy change.

Two existing forums were proposed in some of the conversations as options to adopt the CwC agenda: the HCTT and the INGO Emergencies sub-committee. A Shongjog member said the platform would sustain and gain more gravitas if it aligned with HCTT, but would lose several of its key characteristics, such as unaligned autonomy and equity. Several, though not all, INGO Country Directors said that the INGO Emergencies sub-committee is an obvious option. The sub-committee

runs without a secretariat and is so well aligned with the interests of its INGO members that it will sustain itself. It can also take on responsibilities for partnering with different stakeholders in the sector. There was one other organisation which was open to considering the possibility of hosting the Secretariat for one year as an interim arrangement. Several members and a few stakeholders, including representatives of a few UN agencies, said that two-way communication with communities is a critical gap in humanitarian activities that requires change in policy and practice of organisations, and therefore may be easily co-opted by the specific interests and agendas of the other platforms thereby blocking real change.

The key question for Shongjog in this context is: how can it position CwC in the public domain to lead to meaningful change in current policy and practices. **If the positioning is strong enough, and based on hard evidence, then the discussion about its future, in whichever form, will take on a new significance.**

#### 4. Conclusion

The conclusion is by far the shortest section, because they should be drawn by the readers themselves. The underlying assumption is that the readers will be either Shongjog members or representatives of partners and stakeholder groups. Therefore, this section will pose a few questions for further discussions:

- How can Shongjog generate evidence that there is scope for improvement in organisational practices related to CwC?
- How can Shongjog engage in more strategic discussions, such as implications of CwC for resource allocation, public policy, etc., which can lead to meaningful change in policy and practice in humanitarian aid programmes?
- How can Shongjog move from the 'what' to the 'how' by building on the results of the Shongjog FFM projects?
- What should be the action plan to seize opportunities for quick wins, which can give it an immediate impetus?
- How can the Shongjog multi-stakeholder platform, or its outcomes so far, be sustained after the CDAC-N DEPP funding comes to an end and how can it encourage greater collaborative leadership amongst its members?

**The most critical question is: is Shongjog ready to give up or step back and hand-over? Or will it undertake a drive to sustain its outcomes?**

## Annexure 1

### List of Organisations Whose Representatives Participated in the Conversations

*All participants were from the Bangladesh Country offices of the organisations*

#### *Shongjog Member Organisations*

1.	Action Against Hunger, Bangladesh
2.	Action Aid Bangladesh
3.	Bangladesh Red Crescent Society
4.	BBC Media Action
5.	BRAC
6.	CARE, Bangladesh
7.	Christian Aid
8.	Concern Worldwide
9.	Department of Disaster Management, Government of Bangladesh
10.	Handicap International
11.	ICCO Cooperation
12.	International Organisation for Migration
13.	Plan International
14.	Save the Children in Bangladesh
15.	United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
16.	United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)
17.	World Vision, Bangladesh

#### *Non-member Organisations Who Participated in the Conversations*

1.	Bangladesh Betar
2.	The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)
3.	Oxfam
4.	UN Resident Coordinator's Office
5.	VSO Bangladesh



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