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Policy Brief 3: The Solutions to Large, Complex and Protracted Crisis, Lessons from the Rohingya Refugee Response



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This policy brief summarizes the discussion and recommendations from the webinar titled, 'The Solutions to Large, Complex and Protracted Crisis, Lessons from the Rohingya Refugee Response'. The webinar is part of the integrated development dialogue campaign 'Bangladesh Miracle' organized by Innovision Consulting in association with The Department of Economics North South University and The Financial Express along with mPower as ICT partner and Windmill Advertising, Printagraphy, Sarabangla, Colors Fm 101.6 and Young Economists' Forum (YEF) as event partners. ICCO and CARE is the exclusive thematic partner for Refugee Response webinar for Bangladesh Miracle.

CONTEXT

In collaboration with ICCO Bangladesh, CARE Bangladesh, The Financial Express, and the Department of Economics, North South University, Innovision Consulting Private Limited organized the third webinar of the “Bangladesh Miracle” campaign on 14th July, 2021. The webinar was arranged for discovering and learning from the projects, initiatives, and decisions that have shaped Bangladesh’s international position and humanitarian crisis response system over the past fifty years and an attempt to build future directions and re-imagine the post-pandemic Rohingya refugee response plan.

Sarabangla.net, Windmill Advertising, YEF (Young Economists’ Forum), Pathao, Wateraid Bangladesh, BIID, NextgenEdu, Simprints Technology, GAIN Bangladesh, Colors 101.6 FM, mPower (ICT Partner), and Printagraphy are the other partners of the Bangladesh miracle campaign. The campaign focuses on factors contributing to the success of Bangladesh in key thematic issues over the past 50 years and aims to define the way forward.

The theme “The Solutions to large, complex, and protracted crisis, lessons from the Rohingya Refugee response and finding a sustainable solution” was deemed appropriate, as Bangladesh has learned important lessons while sheltering the Rohingya community, and it is crucial for the country to find a proactive plan for the future.

As we aim to build on the successes, we must acknowledge that the crisis response system and the international relationship of Bangladesh require improvement. During the webinar, the speakers recommended formulating long-term sustainable strategies that focus on the environment as well as the host community alongside the refugees. They also highlighted the issues with deforestation, lack of education, and deteriorating quality of life of the Rohingya refugees, further recommending the formulation and implementation of sustainable solutions.

Munia Islam Mozumder, an Education Specialist, working in Rohingya Response, moderated the webinar. Shakeb Nabi, Country Representative, ICCO Bangladesh, delivered the keynote speech. The commended panelists included: Shahidul Haque, Profession Fellow, North South University (NSU); Marsha Michel, Advisor for the Rohingya Refugee Response, USAID Bangladesh; Johannes Van der Klaauw, Representative, UNHCR Representation in Bangladesh; Kojiro Nakai, Deputy Emergency Coordinator, WFP Bangladesh; Dr. Deepmala Mahla, Vice President, Humanitarian Affairs, CARE International; Abdur Rob, Practice Area Lead for Livelihood, Climate Change and Disaster Response, Innovision Consulting Ltd ; Ipshita Sengupta, Consultant, Act for Peace.

CRITICAL SUCCESSES

Successfully sheltering a displaced population: At present, nine hundred thousand Rohingya refugees live in Bangladesh; 2021 marks the fourth year since their displacement from Myanmar. World leaders have declared the attack against Rohingya refugees as genocide and ethnic cleansing. The movement started in 1982, when the Myanmar government passed a new citizenship law, denying the Rohingya people nationality and leaving them stateless. Bangladesh, the neighbour of Myanmar, came forward and aided the refugees to its capacity. The country has been successful in protecting the Rohingya people, sheltering them, and protecting the community against COVID 19.

Compared to the statistics of the rest of the world and Bangladesh itself, Coronavirus has not affected the Rohingya community as much. The first case of COVID-19 in Rohingya camps was reported in mid-May of 2020. Since then, around 400 Rohingya people have tested positive for COVID-19 and 10 of them have died. A total of over 30,500 Rohingya people were tested. On the other hand, over 5,500 people from the host communities have tested positive for COVID-19, and 73 people have died. More than 61,300 people from the host communities have been tested.

Implementation of Innovative Solutions: The Rohingya population has been a substantial contributing factor in the increased demand for services and goods in Cox's bazar. As donations and relief increased with the influx of refugees, the need for further streamlining the process of relief distribution increased. The commencement of digital payment methods, such as the blockchain and bKash payment, made it easy to keep track of all payments, relief, and other services provided. To ensure food security and appropriate nutrition of the refugees living in Kutupalong and Nayapara camps, food assistance is provided to registered refugee households using an electronic voucher system.

Proper Utilization of limited resources: The government of Bangladesh has worked with decent success even with the limitation of resources. To improve the quality of life of the Rohingya people,

the Government of Bangladesh has moved them to a residential facility in Bhasan Char, from the crowded camps. Over 1,640 Rohingya Muslims have relocated to their new residence in 2020.

There is also shortage of food and other resources in the Rohingya camps, the Government and other stakeholders are working towards eradication of these scarcities.

Engagement of the private sector: As private sector companies are entering the host community areas for facilitating the Rohingya camps and expanding their business, it is creating alternative jobs for the people of the host community.

To accommodate the international humanitarian organization staff and other stakeholders, the hotel and tourism sector is expanding, along with the fisheries and agriculture sector, making Cox's bazar a better economic zone.

Achieved international Coordination: Bangladesh has received immense support from international humanitarian organizations that expanded essential services, including healthcare, water, sanitation, education, protection, and communication. Several humanitarian organizations such as GAIN Bangladesh, CARE Bangladesh, UNICEF, WaterAid, and others are working relentlessly to improve the living conditions of the Rohingya refugees in the camps. The quick arrangement of international support has been an indispensable addition for Bangladesh to aid this huge number of displaced people.

Successful internal management and resource allocation: Allocating resources for around 1 crore people is not a simple task for any country, Bangladesh has done that successfully. Starting from the engagement of international humanitarian organizations to local private organizations, every step of the way, the government has taken calculated risks and has achieved excellent benefits in respect to the betterment of the Rohingya community. The armed forces organizations, the international organizations, the private organizations, and the other stakeholders have been working while consulting with the government of Bangladesh to properly utilize their resources.

CHALLENGES

LaRepatriation of the Rohingya Population: The Rohingyas have rightly been termed as one of the most discriminated communities in the world by the Secretary-General of the UN. It's the perfect example of religious persecution, ethnic cleansing, and statelessness with no clear solutions in sight.

The settlements were spontaneous and had their own ramifications regarding protection, planning, and impact on the social fabric. Bangladesh faces the impact in multiple sectors, including social, economic, environmental, legal, and financial impacts. Due to this change in demography, the sudden loss of their motherland, the Rohingya people are pretty helpless.

The political and military unrest in Myanmar is further indicating that the chances of repatriation in the following years is slim for the Rohingya population in Bangladesh.

Growing unemployment in the Host community: With the ban imposed on fishing in river Naf, around 30,000-40,000 people of Cox's bazaar and surrounding areas have lost their jobs in the fishing industry. 28% of people in Cox's Bazar depend on the fisheries sector, suddenly all of them became jobless. As the demand for resources grew in the local market, creating inflation, the local community became helpless in this situation.

The influx of Rohingya refugees also contributed to the imbalance in the labor market. They offered cheaper labor compared to the host community and the local laborers suddenly found competition in their own home.

Deforestation also contributed to the growing unemployment of the host community. After the entry of Rohingyas in August 2017, more than 2000 hectares of forests have been destroyed for camp development by 2018. Many people of the host community were dependent on these forests for their income and livelihood; they have lost that source of income in under a year.

Price hike of essential goods at Cox's Bazar: The local sellers and shopkeepers reported that the distributed products only for the Rohingya people were leaking out into the local markets. This eventually led to a supply of better quality products into the local market, causing the local sellers to reduce the price of their own goods.

Simultaneously, the price of fresh vegetables, fish, and meat went up tremendously due to the high demand for these commodities from the Rohingya community.

Lack of inter-sectoral coordination: The coordination among the humanitarian organizations is crucial for the crisis at hand. But the whole situation has been adversely affected due to the sudden lockdowns and COVID-19. Specific activities of the organizations were restricted or halted due to the lockdown.

Some activities are getting more priorities while others are being ignored. Improved inter-sectoral coordination among all may improve this situation.

Two Dimensional Security Concerns: Bangladeshis in the area now have to carry their National Identity cards to prove that they are from Bangladesh. The entry of refugees have significantly affected the quality of life for the people of the host community, and now it is restricting their freedom of movement.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Highlighting the importance of sustainable and proactive solutions for the Rohingya community, one of the speakers said, “ I think the issue here is of rights. It is not about the needs, it never was.”

The panelists provided some recommendations for future steps regarding the globally unique issue and bettering the lives of Rohingya people.

Their thoughts are gathered and compiled below:

Allowing the refugees to work legally in the local labor market: The Rohingya people living in the camps can only work informally and they usually find odd jobs which entail manual labor. Finding work is also very difficult for the Rohingya people, especially for women. As they are not working legally with anyone, their income is not ensured either. Legalizing the Rohingya people’s work scope will allow them to be more independent and contribute to their community.

Legalizing their work will also do the following for the Host community:

1. As the Labor market won’t be able to exploit the Rohingya laborers anymore, the wages will get better for the laborers of the host community.
2. The Rohingyas will be able to contribute to the economy and will not be a burden for the host community. Participation from the idle displaced population will boost the economy greatly.

Creating sources of income for Refugees living in Bhasanchar: The refugees living in Bhasanchar are completely dependent on relief and outside help. Around 2000 Rohingya refugees are living in Bhasanchar, more refugees will join them in the near future. There is an opportunity to create a economically active society on this island. Creating jobs & business opportunities for the refugees living there will allow them to be more responsible about their lives.

Promotion of Digital Livelihood: At both the community level and among the Rohingya population, there is a huge percentage of young people. Promoting digital livelihoods like call centers, web-based messaging services, data entry, and other services will facilitate learning and prepare them for a post-refugee life. Soft skills such as leadership, communication skills can be facilitated through small community programs as well. House rents in the host community regions also increased rapidly as more Rohingya people entered Bangladesh. This had a huge negative effect on the local communities.

Promotion of Vocational Training: The organizations that are already working must clearly identify the skill gaps among the refugees, then they need to find out what type of vocational training can be implemented at the community level.

Currently, most people in the camps are “non-literate,” so they have less to no scope when it comes to participating in vocational training. Proper training and education of the refugees may eventually enhance the local economy, too, with their contribution.

Collaboration between the organizations working in Rohingya Refugee Camps: The ultimate solution of taking back the refugees by the Myanmar government is far fetched as of now, even though 70-80% of the refugees want to return home. It is crucial that the host country, which provides shelter to the refugees, tries to ensure better living conditions for them. There should be a proper balance of wages so that the standard of living of the refugees does not deteriorate.

The humanitarian organizations that have been working for the refugees need to carry out evaluations and improve their services. The overall lack of coordination has to be minimized, and all stakeholders need to come together in this crisis.

If some of the restrictions of the humanitarian activities can be lifted during the lockdown, the crisis may be handled more wisely. It should be kept in mind that the rights of the refugees should be prioritized along with their needs. If possible, the organizations involved need to double down their efforts to reduce the vulnerabilities of women and girls in the refugee camps.

Boosting restoration activities: Ever since the refugee influx, deforestation became a prime problem in Cox's Bazar. Along with that, the fishing industry has taken a toll as well.

To restore the former economy and environment of Cox's Bazar, properly planned reforestation programs need to be executed, along with planning for the restoration of the fishing industry. Other pragmatic alternatives need to be explored in case it is impossible even to mitigate the effects of deforestation.

Medium to long-term sustainable solution: According to experts, the Rohingya crisis is expected to last for years to come; there is absolutely no hope of immediate repatriation.

A sustainable program of repatriation can only be possible if all the parties involved can closely work together. Some significant points that can initiate the repatriation include ensuring human

rights for the Rohingya population, holding the perpetrators accountable for the genocide, addressing the root cause of the ethnic cleansing in Myanmar, and ensuring safety, security, and livelihood for the displaced people once they move back.



Photo: ADB

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