No Time to Lose:

An Urgent Call for Access to Quality Education
for Rohingya Children in Cox's Bazar

International Rescue Committee

Front cover: Rohingya children playing in the camp near their homes. During COVID-19 lockdown, all learning centers were closed. *Iris Ebert/IRC*

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on education around the world, with the closure of teaching institutions impacting an estimated 91 percent of students – approximately 1.6 billion children and young people.[i] But for Rohingya children, adolescents and youths in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, interruptions and barriers to education are not new. Government restrictions on access to certified and standardised education opportunities have left informal education by humanitarian agencies as the only pathway to any form of education. A pilot of the Myanmar curriculum targeting 10,000 Rohingya students was due to begin in 2020 but was postponed after COVID-19 lockdown and the closure of learning facilities.

In this report the International Rescue Committee (IRC) demonstrates how informal education programming in Cox's Bazar is constrained by a number of major challenges: limited and short-term funding; low quality of teaching; programme restrictions and approval delays; infrastructural limitations; and low levels of enrolment and student retention – all challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak and response. Ultimately, informal education programming will always be limited by the lack of any form of accreditation or qualifications for graduating students. Certified educational programmes could offer Rohingya children the greatest opportunity for self-determination and development, and facilitate their eventual voluntary return to Myanmar or a third-country of resettlement.

At present, the Rohingya crisis is becoming protracted: refugee returns to Myanmar are unlikely in the short to medium term.[ii] Evidence indicates that even if repatriation started today, it could take as long as 13 years[iii] for all refugees to be repatriated. Today, there are over 900,000[iv] Rohingya refugees residing in Cox's Bazar – over 500,000 of whom are children who currently need, or will soon need, a quality education. The protracted nature of the refugee situation requires a set of solutions that address children's educational needs in the medium-to-long term.

This brief outlines the current barriers to education provision, the effects of COVID-19 on education and the opportunity for distanced learning in the camps, the need for an expansion of education provision in Cox's Bazar, and recommendations for the Government of Bangladesh, donors, humanitarian agencies and institutional partners.

Summary of key recommendations:

1) UNICEF and UNESCO should identify and pilot alternative digital learning technology using the Myanmar curriculum.

2) Humanitarian agencies and partners should expand the pilot of the Myanmar curriculum across all ages and grades.

3) Ensure all refugees have consistent access to internet services and phone connection across all camps.

4) Humanitarian agencies and partners should work to improve education sector coordination and quality assurance with active engagement of the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh.

5) The GoB should work towards creating a conducive policy environment that allows planning, coordination and funding for a whole of society approach to education which benefits both refugees and their host community.

A Rohingya boy returning from collecting fire wood in Cox's Bazar camp. *Iris Ebert/IRC*

Introduction

It has been three years since almost one million Rohingya fled to Bangladesh to escape mass violence in Myanmar. Today, children account for 51 percent of the Rohingya refugees living in Cox's Bazar.[v] Since their arrival, they have been unable to access certified and standardised education, compounding the impact of over two decades of exclusion from education provision in Myanmar.

Globally, refugee children are twice as likely to be out of school as other children.[vi] For Rohingya refugee children, this disparity is even more severe. Over 326,000 Rohingya refugee children (ages 0–18), adolescents (ages 10–19) and youth (ages 15–24)[vii] are in need of education services, including early childhood development (ECD), basic education, and youth vocational training.[viii] Approximately 83 percent of adolescents and youth in Cox's Bazar have no access to any educational or skills development activities – many of whom have already had their educational development interrupted by displacement from Myanmar.[ix]

Humanitarian agencies have endeavored to provide learning opportunities to Rohingya children amidst significant challenges. Informal education provision for refugees by humanitarian agencies in Cox's Bazar uses the UNICEF-developed Guidelines for Informal Education Programming (GIEP), an unaccredited education programme. Thus far, only Levels I and II of the GIEP have been approved for use in Cox's Bazar by the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), while Levels III and IV which target largely adolescents and youth, continue to await approval[x] – leaving most adolescents and youth (7 percent of the refugee population)[xi] unable to access this basic level of education. Yet even if all levels of the GIEP were approved, implementation of an effective, quality programme that achieves learning outcomes for children and sets them up for more successful futures is still constrained by a range of challenges, including: a lack of certification, access barriers for many children, extreme variation in teaching quality. and low levels of enrolment of Rohingya adolescents aged 15 to 18 and youths aged 19–24 (7 percent and less than 1 percent respectively).[xii] In addition, the host communities of Cox's Bazar face significant challenges in accessing quality education, many of which have been exacerbated by both the refugee influx and COVID-19. These issues will all be discussed in more detail below.

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, following months of lobbying efforts by the United Nations (UN), international donors and local civil society, the Government of Bangladesh agreed to permit the piloting of the Myanmar curriculum in Cox's Bazar.[xiii] In the months preceding the COVID-19 lockdown, humanitarian agencies, under the leadership of UNICEF, were making the final preparations to introduce the new curriculum to 10,000 students[xiv] targeting middle grades 6–9. However, the pilot was placed on hold due to government lockdown measures, with no plans to reinitiate until learning centers are allowed to re-open, a date for which has not been set.

The need to overcome these challenges and expand quality, certified education service provision is clear. The current situation in Bangladesh represents a denial of the basic right to education enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – of which Bangladesh and Myanmar are signatories. The immediate consequences of a lack of education provision are an increase in protection risks[xvi] and negative coping mechanisms, including trafficking,[xvii] child labour, child marriage, and criminal activity.[xviii] In the long-term, without a pathway to knowledge and skills development, refugee children living in the Cox's Bazar camps are left with little opportunity for livelihoods upon reaching adulthood. Experience from other contexts also illustrates the net positive impact education provision can have for host nations as well as supporting the sustainable return of refugees when conditions are conducive.[xix]

COVID-19 and Distanced Learning in Cox's Bazar

On March 24th, 2020, education was categorized as "non-lifesaving" by the Government of Bangladesh's Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC), reflecting an effort to reduce large gatherings of people. As a result, more than 6,000 learning spaces in Rohingya refugee camps were shut down and over 325,000 children lost access to learning opportunities. A lack of educational opportunities has exacerbated the inequalities in education for these already vulnerable children, adolescents and youth – a situation that is likely to lead to increased anxiety and hopelessness, as their futures remain uncertain.

Globally, to bridge the learning gap caused by school closures, more than two-thirds of countries have introduced national distanced learning platforms.[xx] The majority of distanced learning platforms require internet access. In the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar, mobile data and internet use are banned.[xxi] Owning a sim card is effectively forbidden and illegal for the Rohingya, as the law permits only Bangladeshi nationals with a national identity card to use them. This means that under lockdown, Rohingya children have been denied access to any form of distanced learning. In other parts of the country, UNICEF is working with the Government of Bangladesh to offer effective remote learning programmes to Bangladeshi children using TV, radio, mobile phone and internet platforms to reach the maximum number of students.[xxii] However, in Bangladesh, only 38 percent of national students aged 5–17 years have access to the internet at home.[xxiii]

Access to internet and telephone communications for refugees could support quality at-home learning opportunities. Successful pre COVID-19 pilots by the IRC like *Pop-Up* learning, an offline tablet-based platform,[xxiv] demonstrate that quality, at-home, offline (and when permitted, online) learning is within reach. Donors, UNICEF, UNESCO and the Government of Bangladesh should work together to offer Rohingya refugees the same vital access to offline and online education as the rest of the world.[xxv]

Above: Rohingya children participating in the *Pop-Up* learning pilot in the IRCs learning centre in Cox's Bazar. *Maruf Hasan/IRC*

Pop-Up is a tablet based offline learning platform. It aims to fill the critical educational gaps in a displaced child's life, providing some sense of normalcy, continuity and critical foundational skills while formal education is being established. This product makes it possible to rapidly deploy learning programs in emergencies where no formal education is available and in a way that supports an eventual transition to formal schools.

The technology delivers locally-relevant, tablet-based learning that fosters emotional support, literacy and numeracy for primary school-aged learners. *Pop-Up* adapts to the varying needs of displaced children around the world, including different educational levels and languages.

How it works

Personalised, adaptive technology serves to provide children with the tools needed to reach their development potential regardless of environmental circumstances.

Autonomous learning includes:

1) Low cost, flexible and mobile technology which allows deployments in homes, centers, and schools. Learning can happen anywhere, at any time.

2) Interactive, engaging and adaptive learning games which enable children to learn at their level.

3) Human support to guide children through their learning, without the need for teachers with academic expertise, which can be difficult to find in crisis contexts.

Rohingya children being taught on tablets in one of the IRC's learning centers in Cox's Bazar. *Maruf Hasan/IRC*

Key Challenges to Providing Education for Rohingya Refugees in Cox's Bazar

Government restrictions on formal teaching for Rohingya children, and the recent failure to launch the formal pilot of the Myanmar curriculum, have left the informal programme provided through the Guidelines for Informal Education Programming (GIEP) as the only pathway to some form of education. However, the quality of education delivered under the GIEP model remains a serious concern requiring urgent attention. The IRC has identified seven key challenges to providing higher quality education for the Rohingya. These hurdles pre-date the COVID-19 outbreak but have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

1) **Limited and short-term funding.** As of August 2020, the education sector was only 5 percent funded.[xxvi] In the COVID-19 response plan (an addendum to the 2020 Joint Response Plan), the education sector sought an additional US$2.5 million. However, no funding has been allocated,[xxvii] in part due to the Government of Bangladesh's categorisation of education services as non-essential. In addition to funding limitations, education interventions are constrained by the duration of funding – which often lasts less than one year. Agencies that the IRC engages with expressed how disruptive such arrangements are, as children are forced to drop out when projects end. Once learning centres and other education facilities are re-opened, it is important that donors, in-line with their Grand Bargain commitment,[xxviii] provide immediate, multi-annual funding to restore and expand the Myanmar curriculum pilot and other education programmes to ensure children of all ages can access quality, accredited schooling. Without adequate levels of multi-annual funding, it will be extremely difficult to overcome other challenges.

2) **Programme restrictions and approval delays.** Government-mandated approvals for programmes delivered by humanitarian partners, including education, are only valid for six months at a time, severely reducing the scope for project planning, teacher training and the long-term continuity of education provision. Humanitarian organisations have reported delays of up to two months in securing approvals, resulting in increased administrative costs and often the inability to retain teaching facilitators. Many organisations therefore have no choice but to fire staff until projects are approved.

3) **Infrastructural limitations.** Most Learning Centres are of poor structural quality: they are typically unventilated, single room buildings that are vulnerable to damage during monsoons or cyclones, and lack basic furniture and scholastic materials. The GIEP enforces no requirement for the type of facility that can be used for Learning Centres, and there is limited free land where agencies could construct better equipped centers. Education sector partners have been seeking Government permission to construct double-storied Learning Centres, with a planned pilot of 300 out of 3000 learning centers to be tested, however, permission is yet to be granted. Rapid expansion beyond the pilot will be essential to enable educational access for the majority of children, adolescents and youth. The government should expedite approval and humanitarian agencies and donors should urgently mobilise and support construction of structures.

4) **Low enrollment for pre-primary and secondary education, and low attendance for primary education.**[xxix] Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Rohingya refugee children were generally neither enrolling nor attending education programs consistently. The 2019 Education Needs Assessment found that of children aged 3–5 years, only 36 percent were attending education programs in learning Centres consistently, while 2 percent were reported to have dropped out.[xxx] For children aged 6–14, while enrolment remained significantly higher than the younger age-group, at 75 percent, the dropout rate for boys and girls was also significantly higher, at 7 percent and 28 percent respectively. Most learning opportunities by humanitarian agencies target this age group. For adolescents aged 15–18 enrolment remains particularly low, with only 3 percent of girls and 10 percent of boys enrolled.[xxxi]

Explanations for such limited uptake of educational opportunities are varied. This is due in part to the minimal educational opportunities provided by humanitarian agencies for adolescents and youth aged 15 and over[xxxii] as the Government of Bangladesh places restrictions on the provision of vocational skills training and there is no approved learning framework targeting this age group. According to the Education Needs Assessment (2019), for boys, uptake might also be hindered by lessons not being perceived as age-

Above: Rohingya children during one of the lessons in the IRC learning centre in the Cox's Bazar camp. *Maruf Hasan/IRC*

appropriate, or the need to help out at home. For girls, limited uptake is often due to cultural norms, such as families believing girls should attend madrassa (a religious school) instead, or girls being withdrawn from school by their families due to the belief it will protect them from sexual abuse by male adults whom they meet on their way to school.[xxxiii] In some instances, girls are unable to continue their studies once they reach adolescence, as they are encouraged into early marriage. The IRC's protection monitoring found that after the onset of COVID-19 and the closure of learning centres, incidences of child marriages increased.

5) Very limited opportunities for vocational skills training due to government restrictions.
Since the arrival of the latest wave of Rohingya refugees to Cox's Bazar in 2017, the government has restricted access to vocational skills training opportunities. No project approvals have been granted for humanitarian projects that include any vocational training. Agencies and refugees that the IRC talked to revealed that any vocational training centers in the camps, such as a phone repair centre in Camp 13, have remained closed even if individually approved by the government. The 2020 Joint Response Plan (JRP) now includes propositions for vocational training. If related projects are approved and implemented, it will be important that the government also grants permission for trainees to apply their skills through either self-employment projects in the camp, or to access work opportunities at least within the camp.

6) Low quality of teaching. In Cox's Bazar, there is currently no agreed approach for delivering basic teacher training[xxxiv] and no framework to ensure quality control of teaching. The limited number of available qualified teachers, and few local Bangladeshi nationals and refugees who could be trained, leads to overcrowding of classes. In most learning centers,

a single room hosts two grade levels, divided into four separate groups of boys and girls of about 20–25 children each. Furthermore, few of the trained teachers speak Burmese or Chittagonian (the closest dialect to the Rohingya language) and even fewer of them are female, resulting in lower enrolment and attendance of girls.[xxxv] Teaching materials are also often unavailable; as of November 2019, the GIEP Level I and II teaching materials had still not been disseminated to education service providers.[xxxvi] Finally, there are no opportunities for secondary or tertiary education, leaving older children without relevant education options and severely limiting the scope for refugees to re-integrate into formal education.

7) Lack of accreditation and central, standardised learning assessments. The GIEP is entirely unaccredited, leaving Rohingya children without proof of their level of education attainment should they wish to return to Myanmar or settle in a third country. In addition to lack of accreditation, the system of tracking learning outcomes among Rohingya that was recently introduced by the education sector lacks a mechanism for centralised checks on quality and effectiveness. Instead, humanitarian agencies implement the learning and assessment frameworks independently – resulting in variable levels of quality and may lead to biased positive reporting since since agencies are unlikely to mark themselves poorly. Similarly, there remains no formal mechanism for centralised periodic monitoring and quality assurance for the learning environment, or general adherence to Education in Emergency standards. In general, this is left to the individual agencies with occasional support from the sector. Without accreditation, regular assessment and monitoring, children are left with extremely variable levels of quality in provision, and agencies are left with little understanding of what might improve children's learning outcomes.

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Rohingya children during a lesson at an IRC learning centre
in the Cox's Bazar camp. *Maruf Hasan/IRC*

Education, Economic Growth and Refugee Return

> **"EDUCATION IS A BASIC HUMAN RIGHT AND THE BEST INVESTMENT THAT WE CAN MAKE TO ENSURE A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE AND LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND"** [xxxvii]

The barriers to the provision of quality education for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are diverse and complex and will require a coordinated national and international strategy to address them. Yet ultimately, expanding access to quality education in Cox's Bazar offers benefits not only for the Rohingya encamped there but also for their host community, the Government of Bangladesh, and the whole of Bangladeshi society.

In a recent assessment of Cox's Bazar host communities, just 16 percent of men and 13 percent of women aged 18–24 reported completing secondary education, while completion of primary education amongst ages 12–24 stands at 65 percent for men and 72 percent for women.[xxxviii] These rates are significantly below the national average. Nationally, the primary level enrolment rate is 98 percent and drop-out rates are just under 19 percent country-wide. Furthermore, the quality of teaching in the district is poor; Cox's Bazar ranked second to last in reading and maths in the most recent National Student Assessment. In discussions with the IRC, local government officials have highlighted education as an area in which further support remains critical.

UNESCO research shows that there is a direct correlation between education and sustainable development.[xxxix] Educated refugees are far more likely to reduce their dependence on humanitarian aid and positively contribute to local economies – whether that is in a host country, a country of resettlement, or in their own country upon their return.[xl] Improvements in access to education and skills development for both the host community and refugees has been shown in the short-term to reduce reliance on negative coping mechanisms such as child marriage or involvement in criminal activity[xli] and in the long-term to lead to reductions in poverty, inequality, early pregnancy[xlii] as well as promote norms of social cohesion and tolerance.[xliii]

While planning for humanitarian education provision in Cox's Bazar is currently limited to Rohingya children, an inclusive whole of society approach which encourages investment into both Rohingya and host communities could have net positives for the region. Even in the immediate term, global evidence reveals a significant positive correlation between the number of secondary school years completed and economic growth.[xliv] One additional year of schooling on average increases an individual's earnings by up to 10 percent.[xlv] As Bangladesh strives to build on positive progress towards the SDGs, including progress in the education sector, the implications of quality education expansion cannot be overstated. Rohingya children who for three years have not been able to access certified education have individually lost an estimated 30 percent of potential earnings. Offering a high-quality education can "properly equip Rohingya refugee children and youth with essential knowledge and skills for their futures and prevent a lost generation".[xlvi]

Above: Rohingya children during a lesson at an IRC learning centre in the Cox's Bazar camp. *Maruf Hasan/IRC*

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Recommendations

The IRC has previously articulated the case for a Whole of Society approach in Cox's Bazar [xlvii] to achieve two interconnected core objectives over the next three-to-five years: improve outcomes for all communities affected by Rohingya displacement, and foster social cohesion between the Rohingya and local communities. Expansion of education provision is a core element of the proposed approach and central to the outcomes sought. The following recommendations address the specific needs of the education sector, however, these should be read and understood in combination with a wider set of recommendations focused on a whole of society approach, including steps to improve planning, coordination and response funding under the leadership of the Government of Bangladesh and with the support of the international community. [xlviii]

The Government of Bangladesh

1) **Lift policy restrictions limiting the provision of education and vocational skills training.** Allowing humanitarian agencies to engage in education and skills training with Rohingya and host community members can offer net benefits for the whole of society in Bangladesh.

2) **Work with humanitarian and institutional partners to provide long-term Whole of Society education across Cox's Bazar.** The education sector should collaborate in partnership with the Cox's Bazar district education office to establish a 6 year education development plan taking a Whole of Society (WoS) approach that targets both refugees and host communities to improve teaching, assessment, and quality assurance based on minimum standards.

3) **Ensure all refugees have consistent access to internet services and phone connection across all camps.** Enabling the Rohingya to access the internet would provide immediate opportunities offer a pathway to begin distanced education programming for refugee children in Cox's Bazar, and to disseminate crucial information about COVID-19.

Humanitarian agencies and institutional partners

1) **Work with the government of Bangladesh to revive and expand the pilot of the Myanmar curriculum across all ages and grades.**

   a. UNICEF should work to expand the pilot across all ages and grades as soon as learning centers re-open to provide a stronger sample of its effectiveness. Once learning centers re-open, UNICEF should prioritise the pilot and ensure it is completed within one school term to enable faster roll out, ideally in the 2021 school calendar.

   b. UNICEF should facilitate the education sector to develop and implement a comprehensive "teaching development plan" to facilitate the roll-out of the Myanmar curriculum in the immediate, medium and longer term.

2) **UNICEF and UNESCO should identify and pilot alternative digital learning technology using the Myanmar Curriculum.** Expansion of offline digital learning as an alternative pilot to the now-delayed classroom-based rollout of the Myanmar Curriculum, offers a chance to examine the effectiveness of the new curriculum in lieu of all refugees having consistent access to internet services and learning spaces reopening. This investment would also support education provision continuity in the case of future lockdowns. In the meantime, agencies should scale up pilots that have already been conducted in the camp, such as *Pop-Up* by the IRC,[xlix] as well as learning from and adapting the Learning Passport[l] by UNICEF and Microsoft.

3) **Improve education sector coordination and quality assurance.**

   a. The education sector, working with the Cox's Bazar education office, should establish quality benchmarks and standards for both the Myanmar curriculum and the GIEP across all ages and grades in partnership with the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) and the Government of Myanmar (GoM).

   b. Ensure adherence to minimum standards including the Education in Emergencies (INEE), Child Protection (Alliance), and WASH (SPHERE) standards.

Above: Rohingya children at the IRCs learning centre in the Cox's Bazar Camp. *Maruf Hasan/IRC*

Donors

1) Work towards offering multi-year education funding. All donors should seek to emulate the example set by Education Cannot Wait (ECW) and USAID to expand funding in-line with the education cycle of the Myanmar curriculum.

2) Fund humanitarian initiatives to overcome barriers to girls' education and development. Increase access to education and skills training with a specific focus on programmes that encourage the long-term retention of girls in schools, targeting refugees and host community.

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