

STRENGTHENING CONNECTIONS

WHY SOCIAL COHESION MATTERS FOR THE ROHINGYA AND HOST BANGLADESHI COMMUNITIES



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Cover photo: A Rohingya refugee looks over flooded camps in late July, 2021.

Photo: [Zia Naing for NRC](#)

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Executive Summary

In 2017, atrocities by the Myanmar military drove over 850,000 Rohingya across the border into Bangladesh, where they continue to live in temporary settlements today. Over the past four years, as conditions inside the refugee camps have deteriorated, the host community in Teknaf and Ukhiya—who generously welcomed refugees in 2017—have seemingly grown wary of their protracted presence. Intensifying environmental, economic and social impacts linked to continued Rohingya displacement have raised tensions, and studies since 2019 have documented declining social cohesion between refugee and host communities.

The present study, undertaken by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in collaboration with researchers at Dhaka University (DU), assesses the challenges and opportunities to social cohesion in the Rohingya context. The report maps out social tension across five issue areas: environment and ecology; labour market; cultural and political landscape; land; and the presence of the humanitarian community.

Between November 2020 and February 2021, qualitative data was collected through two streams—through interviews and focus group discussions with both the host and refugee community conducted by researchers from Dhaka University; and through an analysis of existing briefs, policy papers, and research material produced by NRC's ICLA programme and IRC's Protection programme in Bangladesh. In July, a further round of remote interviews was conducted with NGO practitioners and policy leaders to triangulate findings.



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Key Findings

- Tensions remain between refugee and host community regarding access to land and livelihoods, and regarding the impact of refugee settlements on the local environment.
- While some host community members oppose the presence of refugees, a much larger portion of respondents are either supportive, ambivalent or balanced in their views.
- Covid-19 has magnified differences and misgivings between refugees and the host community. Over one year of rolling lockdowns, many (in both communities) have lost jobs and access to livelihoods. Indebtedness has increased, as has hunger and frustration.
- Within both refugee and host communities, perceptions of respondents who identify as female vary from those of respondents who identify as male. Across issue areas, female respondents focus on material needs, deprivations, and barriers to social cohesion; while male respondents identify anxieties around gender roles, cultural considerations and perceived threats to morality.
- Indications that media coverage of refugees has misrepresented perceptions on the ground.

Recommendations

- **International donors and NGOs** should address the environmental impact of refugee settlements in Teknaf and Ukhiya through short-term livelihoods programmes in the host community. Supporting host communities is crucial to fostering a positive relationship between host Bangladeshis and refugees, and between communities and NGOs. A joint programme by IOM and FAO that was launched in 2018 provides a replicable model: to provide high quality, nutritious food; increase income for local farmers; and contribute to the regeneration of the local forest.
- **International donors and NGOs** should improve access to coordinated dispute resolution mechanisms for host and refugee communities. Currently, dispute resolution within the refugee community and between the refugee and host community remains ad-hoc and untransparent, with already overstretched camp officials taking on the role of informal arbitrators. NGOs with dedicated legal aid programming can be mobilized to a. mediate disputes over land; and b. train community leaders to become mediators.
- **The Government of Bangladesh, international donors and NGOs** should establish a system of community consultations on inter-communal relations and local needs as part of social cohesion programming. For social cohesion programming to be successful, community buy-in is critical. The implementation

of interventions should be preceded by consultations with local government officials, union members, the RRR, and a representative cross section of the target community. For example, before Alternate Dispute Resolution programming is designed for Ukhiya, programming should be informed by the specific needs—not just of the sub-district at large but the target unions in which it will operate. This should include consultations with Union Parishads and Upazila Parishads, upazila officials, *majhis*, CiCs and village courts.

- **All relevant actors should center** gender sensitivity as a cornerstone of all social cohesion interventions. For all actors, it is imperative to ensure programming is not reinforcing male-dominated structures, that inclusion of women is not tokenistic, and that social cohesion analysis and programming does not exclude those who are transgender and/or gender non-binary. For example, a coordinated dispute resolution mechanism that excludes women is not just an impediment to peace, but an active driver of interpersonal conflict.
- **The Government of Bangladesh** should designate vital protection services as essential to avoid disruption to life-saving services and address protection risks resulting from, and contributing to, community tensions. Over one year of rolling lockdowns in Teknaf and Ukhiya has restricted the presence of protection actors. On the ground, this means limited monitoring, programming and interventions to ameliorate disputes, abuses, GBV and other protection concerns. While foregrounding Covid-19 safety guidelines—and in conjunction with the vaccination drive in the camps—protection actors should be allowed back into the camps. Relatedly, it is vital to ensure securitization measures in response to increased criminality do not themselves become drivers for conflict.
- **The Government of Bangladesh and NGOs** should work towards expanding access to education for refugees and the host community. As Bangladesh accelerates vaccination, education programming should be reintroduced in the camps as schools are reopened in the region.

Introduction

When soldiers swept into Rakhine State in August, 2017, they were acting on orders from Myanmar's military leadership: "Kill all you see."¹ Over the next few weeks, the Tatmadaw, the official Burmese name for Myanmar military forces, burnt homes, and killed and raped indiscriminately. In one of the swiftest movements of people in recent decades, 850,000 Rohingya were forced to flee Rakhine and seek refuge in Teknaf and Ukhiya sub-districts of Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

In those initial months of the crisis, the needs of the refugee community were acute and immediate— people needed food and shelter, survivors of grievous atrocities needed urgent medical attention, children needed to be reunited with their families. The first response, led by the Bangladeshi host community, saved countless lives.

Four years have passed, and the lives of refugees have stagnated; their hopes dashed time and again by circumstances beyond their control. Year after year, the monsoon season has worsened conditions in camps, destroying bamboo and tarpaulin shelters and internally displacing families. Since 2019, multiple fires have left a trail of destruction, and the global Covid-19 pandemic has compounded health concerns, deepened uncertainty and curtailed service delivery for more than a year. In response to a rise in crime, Bangladesh authorities have erected a barbed wire fence surrounded by concertina wire, impeding freedom of movement and raising serious humanitarian concerns. The relocation of refugees to Bashan Char, too, has been done without adequate consultation across the Rohingya community and protection actors.

Overwhelmingly, refugees want to influence the trajectory of their lives as they await safe and dignified repatriation to Rakhine. Children want to be able to attend school, youth and adolescents want to continue learning and acquire new skills, and women and girls want to live without the constant threat of abuse and violence. These basic human needs continue to go under addressed in Cox's Bazar. While Bangladesh deserves praise for opening its borders and providing land and aid to those in acute need, developing needs of refugees require the response be adapted.

The path forward for the Rohingya remains uncertain. The military takeover in Myanmar has made conditions for voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return more remote.² While regional institutions, governments, non-governmental organizations and rights bodies continue to lobby for recognition of fundamental rights for Rohingya in Myanmar, the country's de facto authorities have maintained discriminatory policies and further restricted movement in Rakhine State.³

Meanwhile, host communities in Teknaf and Ukhiya—which generously welcomed refugees in 2017—have seemingly grown wary of their protracted presence. Intensifying environmental, economic and social impacts linked to continued Rohingya displacement have raised tensions, and studies since 2019 have documented declining social cohesion between refugee and host communities. Over consumption of resources and reshaping of the landscape have been key causes of concern and resentment among host communities. A June 2019 report by BRAC University's Centre for Peace and Justice described how clear cutting of forests for makeshift shelters—without consultation with the host community—has created a hotter, drier and dustier environment around Cox's Bazar, and how poor waste management has polluted waterways.⁴ Water, has become scarcer, too, as consumption has increased to meet the needs of refugees.

Economic impacts of ongoing Rohingya displacement have likewise fueled frustration among host communities. A 2019 survey found that, among Rohingya and Bangladeshi respondents who believed their communities did not have harmonious relations, competition for employment and livelihoods was the chief source of tension.⁵ More recent tracking by the World Bank has revealed significant decreases in employment among host communities as Bangladesh's economy has contracted in response to Covid-19.⁶ Simultaneously, competition for jobs has increased as more refugees and host community members—including



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1 Hannah Beech, Saw Nang and Marlise Simon. "Kill All You See". The New York Times (2020). <https://nyti.ms/3ojvT68>.

2 Human Rights Watch. "Myanmar: Military Coup Kills Fragile Democracy" (1 February 2021). <https://www.hrw.org/news/01/02/2021/myanmar-military-coup-kills-fragile-democracy>.

3 Peter Kenny. "People of Myanmar facing many challenges since coup, says UN official". Andalou Agency (6 August 2021). <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/people-of-myanmar-facing-maa-ny-challenges-since-coup-says-un-official/2326975>.

4 *Social Cohesion, Resilience and Peace Building Between Host Population and Rohingya Refugee Community in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh*. Centre for Peace and Justice, BRAC University (June 2019). https://cpj.bracu.ac.bd/wo-content/uploads/2020/09/UNDP-Social-Cohesion-report_final23122019.pdf.

5 *Bulletin: Rohingya and host communities: Social cohesion*. Ground Truth Solutions (June 2019). https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Bangladesh_rohingya_host_socialcohesion_062019.pdf.

6 *Impacts of Covid-19 on Work and Wages in Cox's Bazar: Part 1 - Host Communities*. World Bank Group (December 2020). <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/163691622731451722/pdf/Impacts-of-COVID-19-on-Work-and-Wages-in-Coxs-Bazar-Part-1-Host-Communities.pdf>.

manywomen—seek employment to offset household earning losses.⁷

A 2020 case study by KOFF highlighted social impacts of the humanitarian response that have threatened social cohesion, including complaints that INGOs have hired away host community teachers to serve in the camps, leaving local schools under-resourced. The study also observed that growing tensions had sparked intra- and intercommunal violence among Rohingya groups and between refugees and host communities, leading authorities to adopt “more restrictive and securitized policies” to curb conflict.⁸ These policies have in turn fenced off refugees from local Bangladeshis, reinforced stereotypes about Rohingya criminality and fueled mistrust.⁹

The continued surge of COVID-19 has also surfaced the grievances of local Bangladeshis struggling with rising prices brought on by the humanitarian response, worried by losses of land, and frustrated at having not received more assistance.¹⁰ In the first months of the pandemic, tensions rose, with host community members suspicious that refugees and NGOs were “*hiding the real number of infections in the camps.*”¹¹

In an era of protracted displacement, social cohesion has emerged as a significant migration policy concern. In displacement responses, social cohesion remains an important—albeit underfunded—area of programming, especially in contexts where often traumatised communities have sought refuge in areas where the immediate host community is already suffering insecurities of their own. The available research indicates that by minimizing disparities, avoiding polarization and increasing public confidence in policies and institutions related to migration, refugees and host communities can be an economic and social asset to each other.¹²

The term itself, “social cohesion”, can be understood as having three levels—the individual, communal, and institutional.¹³ Although widely categorized as the absence of overt violence, contemporary understandings of social cohesion foreground the multiplicity of values, traditions and cultures found in societies as an opportunity for cohesion and peace.¹⁴ Operationally, social cohesion can be thought of as “creating a sense of collective identity and mutual support. This includes building a sense of local identity, social networks, and safe space; promoting features of an inclusive local cultural heritage; and encouraging cultural diversity while promoting tolerance and a willingness to accept other cultures.”¹⁵

The present study, undertaken by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in collaboration with researchers at Dhaka University (DU), assesses the challenges and opportunities to social cohesion in the Rohingya context. The report maps out social tension across five issue areas: environment and ecology; labour market; cultural and political landscape; land; and NGO presence. Each section identifies the nature of the conflict, presents nuanced perspectives from both refugees and the host community, and makes recommendations to address root causes.

Throughout, our engagement centers on a peacebuilding lens through two distinct approaches. First, our starting point is one repeated often by peacebuilders—that while conflict may be inevitable, violent conflict need not be.¹⁶ Although there are tensions, and indeed conflicts—both perceived and material—between Rohingya refugees and the Bangladeshi host community, we show that under the current conditions, this conflict cannot be categorized as “violent.” On the contrary, although there have been a handful of incidents between the host and refugee community, there have been no organized confrontations, although risks of escalation might increase with time. For now, “conflict” between the host and refugee community remains in the realm of disputes, disorder, and occasional opportunistic criminality. Second, we propose, that the limited scale and intensity of conflicts in Cox’s Bazar presents the perfect conditions for peacebuilding programming that addresses core grievances and creates the conditions necessary for social cohesion. In Part Two, we make concrete recommendations to this end for non-governmental organizations, the Government of Bangladesh, and donor governments.



When Hasina fled Rakhine in 2017, the host community in Teknaf gave her refuge. Photographed by Ingebjørg Kårstad of NRC in 2017, the photo shows Hasina being transported to her new home in the Kutupalong extension camp.

7 Ibid.

8 Andrea Grossenbacher. *Case study: Social cohesion and peacebuilding in the Rohingya refugee crisis in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh*. KOFF (December 2020). <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/bangladesh/document/covid-19-explained>.

9 Ibid.

10 *Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh: Market Monitor*. United Nations World Food Programme (April 2021). <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/cox-s-bazar-bangladesh-market-monitor-april-2021>.

11 AZM Anas. “Coronavirus fuels tensions between Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi hosts”. *The New Humanitarian* (27 July 2020). <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/07/27/Bangladesh-Rohingya-refugee-host-coronavirus-aid>.

12 Andrea Grossenbacher. *Case study: Social cohesion and peacebuilding in the Rohingya refugee crisis in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh*. KOFF (December 2020). <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/bangladesh/document/covid-19-explained>.

13 Xavier Fonseca, Stephan Lukosch and Frances Brazier. *Social cohesion revisited: a new definition and how to characterize it*. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, vol. 32(2) (2019). <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13511610.2018.1497480?af=R>.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Johan Galtung. “Theories of conflict”. *Definitions, dimensions, negations, formations*. Oslo: *Transcend* (2009).

Methodology and Design

This study uses a combination of primary data, internal INGO assessments, public briefs and desk research to assess and analyse the sources of conflict, or perceived conflict between Rohingya refugees and the host community in Cox's Bazar. Between November 2020 and February 2021, qualitative data was collected through two streams—through interviews and focus group discussions with both the host and refugee community conducted by researchers from Dhaka University; and through an analysis of existing briefs, policy papers, and research material produced by NRC's ICLA programme and IRC's Protection programme in Bangladesh. In July, a further round of remote interviews was conducted with NGO practitioners and policy leaders to triangulate findings.

Thirty (30) key informant interviews were held with local community leaders, elders, Camp in Charge (CiCs), and government representatives in Teknaf and Ukhiya. Two focus group discussions were held with the Rohingya refugee community in Teknaf and Ukhiya, along with key informant interviews with Rohingya religious leaders, elders and NGO volunteers. To triangulate findings, additional interviews were conducted with individuals associated with local law enforcement agencies, local government representatives and officials, journalists, human rights activists, and leadership of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission (RRRC). Primary data was coded for thematic analysis.

Terminology and ethical considerations

For the purpose of this report, the refugee and host community encompass the 900,000 Rohingya in Teknaf and Ukhiya, and the immediate Bangladeshi population that hosts them in the region. On occasions when the broader Bangladeshi population beyond Cox's Bazar is referenced, the distinction is specified. In line with international law, we use "refugees" to refer to the Rohingya community, noting here that the Bangladesh government prefers the term "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals" (FDMN).

To ensure anonymity, all data collected, sourced from internal archives, or otherwise collated was scrubbed for personal markers of refugees. In cases where names of refugees are used, they have been changed. For participants from the host community, we do not use names, but acknowledge positions of public officials in three cases. Before each interview, informed consent was obtained from all participants.



The Rohingya camps in Teknaf and Ukhiya were constructed by cutting down hills, with shelters resting on loose, sandy land. Photo from 2018 by Ingebjørg Kårstad/ Norwegian Refugee Council.

BACKGROUND

Although Bangladesh is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention, the country has hosted small communities of persecuted Rohingya for decades. Rohingya have sought refuge in Bangladesh since the 1970s, intermittently forced to flee violence, persecution, and widespread atrocities by Myanmar authorities.¹⁷ Cross-border movements, triggered by political uncertainty in Myanmar, occurred in 1978, in the early 1990s, and 2012. In August 2017, violations described by the UN as “textbook ethnic cleansing”¹⁸ drove almost 750,000 Rohingya across the border into Cox’s Bazar.¹⁹ While repatriation has been sought—and lobbied—by stakeholders at every level, the current crisis remains unresolved.

Persecuted Rohingya have sought refuge in Cox’s Bazar, a district in the southeast coast of Bangladesh, bordered by the Bay of Bengal on the south and the west, and by Myanmar—specifically Rakhine state—to the east. With a total area of 2,492 square kilometers, the region represents just over 1.5 percent of Bangladesh’s total land mass. At the southern end of Cox’s Bazar, a narrow peninsula barely 15 kilometers across at its widest point juts out to sea. This strip of land—comprising the sub-districts of Ukhiya and Teknaf—used to be a sleepy coastline with a population of 465,000 people.²⁰ Now, it is home to the largest single settlement of displaced people in the world.

According to a 2018 UNDP report, Cox’s Bazar had higher levels of illiteracy, and infant mortality compared to the rest of the country.²¹ In communities dependent almost entirely on agriculture, headcount poverty was at 42 percent.²² Crime, too, was quietly on the rise. A 2013 report by Saferworld called Cox’s Bazar “a hub for trafficking narcotics, small arms and light weapons”.²³ Since 2010, there had been an increase in drug trafficking and smuggling along the Teknaf-Ukhiya coastline, with government reports finding that “most consignments used the Yangon-Maungdaw route in Myanmar, [and were] trafficked to different places of Teknaf and Cox’s Bazar of Bangladesh.”²⁴ The same report identified five main points of entry of illegal substances into Bangladesh: Teknaf, Sabrang, Dakhinpara, Jaliapara, and Shah Porir Dwip.²⁵

In September 2017, boats filled with Rohingya crowded these ports. In late September, Muneeza Naqvi of the *Associated Press* reported from Shah Porir Dwip:

“Mounds of earth in the cemeteries of this little town are the only reminders of Rohingya who drowned as their boats capsized, often just a few heartbreaking meters away from the safety of the shore. A solitary pile of earth, away from the other graves, holds an infant whose body washed ashore days after the boat carrying him capsized. ‘Ten children are buried in that grave,’ said Nur Islam, the imam of the town’s main mosque, pointing to a large mound covered in thorny branches to keep dogs and other animals from disrespecting the graves.”

Currently, there are 877,710 Rohingya refugees spread across a network of camps in the two upazilas of Teknaf and Ukhiya. The table below, populated with collated data from the most recent Bangladesh census and ISCG data, shows the breakdown in numbers of host and refugees.

Location	Population of Host Community	Population of Rohingya refugees
Ukhiya upazila	277,120	736,410
Teknaf upazila	348,438	141,300
Total	625,558	877,710

Source: Bangladesh Population Census 2011; Inter Sector Coordination Group (2021).

1978

The Tatmadaw coordinates “Operation Nagamin” to screen population for “foreigners”, displacing over 20,000. Repatriation of over 180,000 by the end of 1979.

1990s

Over 250,000 flee forced labour, widespread sexual assault and persecution across Rakhine. Following the signing of a MoU between Bangladesh and Myanmar on May 12, 1993 between Bangladesh and Myanmar, almost all Rohingya refugees are repatriated, amidst allegations of some coercion.²⁰

2012

Riots in Rakhine, orchestrated by a resurgent Buddhist right, kill hundreds of Rohingya and displace many more²¹. 10,000 flee to Bangladesh. As of 2021, no resolution to displacement.

2016

25,00 displaced after Rohingya militant group ARSA attacks border guard outposts, killing nine soldiers²². The army retaliates with coordinated killing, rape and arson.

2017

The Tatmadaw’s “final clearance operations” kill at least 6,700, maim and injure thousands, and drive almost 900,000 people across the border into Bangladesh. As of 2021, no resolution.

17 “Timeline: a visual history of the Rohingya refugee crisis”. *Medecins San Frontieres* (21 August 2020). <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/what-we-do/news-stories/news/timeline-visual-history-rohingya-refugee-crisis>.

18 “UN human rights chief points to ‘textbook example of ethnic cleansing’ in Myanmar”. *UN News* (11 September 2017). <https://news.un.org/en/story/2017/09/564622-un-human-rights-chief-points-textbook-example-ethnic-cleansing-myanmar>.

19 Rohingya Refugee Crisis. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. <https://www.unocha.org/rohingya-refugee-crisis>.

20 *Multi-Sector Needs Assessment - Host Community*. Inter Sector Coordination Group (2018).

21 *Impacts of the Rohingya Refugee Influx on Host Communities*. United Nations Development Programme (1 November 2018). <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/bangladesh/docs/Publications/Pub-2019/Impacts%20of%20the%20Rohingya%20Refugee%20Influx%20on%20Host%20Communities.pdf>.

22 *Ibid.*, at 95.

23 *Safety and security in the South-East border area of Bangladesh*. Saferworld (2013). <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/-736safety-and-security-in-the-south-east-border-area-of-bangladesh>.

24 *Annual Drug Report*. Department of Narcotics Control, Government of Bangladesh (2016). http://dnc.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/dnc.portal.gov.bd/annual_reports/c6b7af4e_6b49_16c9_0ba68_6e6c694adb0/Annual20Report,202016%.pdf.

25 Excerpted from Islam, Imrul. *The Emerald City*. M.A diss., Georgetown University (2020).

Part I: Sources of Tension

Part I of this report identifies, describes, and analyzes key sources of tension between the host and refugee community in Teknaf and Ukhiya. In particular, it takes seriously the nature of conflict, with an eye toward interventions to address, ameliorate, and ultimately transform the root causes of tensions.

Between November 2020 and February 2021, a series of interviews were held with both refugees and host community members in Teknaf and Ukhiya. A total of thirty-three (30) interviews were conducted. In addition, thirty (30) key informant interviews were held with local community leaders, elders, Camp in Charge (CiCs), and government representatives in Teknaf and Ukhiya. Two focus group discussions were held with the Rohingya refugee community in Teknaf and Ukhiya, along with key informant interviews with Rohingya religious leaders, elders and NGO volunteers.

Our findings highlight tensions (or perceived tensions) across five key areas: ecology and environment; labour market; land use; the presence of non-governmental organizations; and contestations over the cultural and political landscape.

Ecology and Environment

In September 2017, as thousands walked, swam or sailed across the border each day, the Bangladesh Prime Minister visited the camps in person and promised compassion — “if we can feed 160 million, we can also feed 700,000.” Initially, the government did just that, allocating land for additional camps, mobilizing the office of the Rohingya Refugee Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC), temporarily keeping borders open, and facilitating increased coordination between government and international agencies to scale up facilities.²⁶

In those early months of the crisis, assessments revealed acute food insecurity, endemic malnutrition, high rates of Hepatitis-C, a wide array of post-traumatic disorders, and escalating risks of gender-based violence.²⁷ In Cox’s Bazar, the needs of the refugee community were immediate — food, shelter, healthcare — and Dhaka’s facilitation of a concerted humanitarian response served as the bridge between life and death.

But it came at a cost. To build shelters, forests needed to be cleared. For firewood, trees needed to be cut down. Almost overnight, Teknaf’s green hills turned brown, then — as bamboo shelters were covered with tarpaulin tops — blue. In a matter of weeks, a fifteen-year forestation plan had been decimated. Speaking to reporters, a Divisional Forest Officer claimed that about 750,000 kg of wood was being burned every day as fuel.²⁸ Reporting from camps, journalist Kaamil Ahmed wrote:

“Look out from the high-ground in the middle of Kutapalong and two sights greet the eyes: Myanmar’s green hills silhouetted in the east, and dehydrated, denuded mounds pocked by the blue-black tarpaulin sheets of makeshift shelters everywhere else.”²⁹

For a while, with each passing day, the tragedy compounded. To make space, hills had been flattened and shelters hurriedly built on slopes, often on top of each other. As the tree cover disappeared, Teknaf’s elephants had become trapped. Soon, they began encroaching on rickety shelters bewildered and confused, and were beaten back, only to arrive again in greater numbers. Over the next few months, at least fourteen refugees were trampled to death.³⁰

The effects of the influx spread outside Kutapalong. Public service delivery in Teknaf and Ukhiya, designed for a quarter of a million people, suddenly had to cope with an extra one million. Hospitals, already underfunded and overstretched, were quickly overwhelmed with Rohingya refugees who needed urgent care. UNDP reported that the influx has stretched local institutions and civil servants to such an extent that social safety net programs for host communities had been suspended.³¹

26 Bangladesh: Humanitarian Response Plan. Inter Sector Coordination Group (2017).

27 “Press Release: Report reveals dire needs of Rohingya refugees.” International Rescue Committee (10 October 2017). <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/report-reveals-dire-needs-rohingya-refugees>.

28 Tarek Mahmud. “Rohingya influx: 15-year-old forestation project destroyed in 57 days.” Dhaka Tribune (21 October 2017). <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2017/10/21/rohingya-influx-15-year-old-forestation-project-destroyed-57-days>.

29 Kaamil Ahmed. “Bangladesh forests stripped bare as Rohingya refugees battle to survive.” *The New Arab* (25 January 2018). <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/bangladeshi-forests-stripped-rohingya-refugees-battle-survive>.

30 “Endangered elephants trapped by world’s largest refugee camp.” National Geographic (27 November 2018). <https://on.natgeo.com/39FHKaE>.

31 *Impacts of the Rohingya Refugee Influx on Host Communities*. UNDP (1 November 2018). <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/bangladesh/docs/Publications/Pub2019-/Impacts20%of20%the20%Rohingya20%Refugee20%Influx20%on20%Host20%Communities.pdf>.

The same needs assessment found that some local administration and sector officials were spending at least 50 percent of their time on Rohingya matters, resulting in delayed and scaled down public service delivery for host communities in Teknaf and Ukhiya. Many were working weekends without remuneration.

“ Surveys found that the initial compassion of the host community toward the Rohingya was waning. In January, 2018, about 45 percent of households in Teknaf and 62 percent in Ukhiya expressed concern about road congestion in their locality, and more than two thirds felt road conditions were deteriorating. When asked, a majority of respondents attributed these changes to the Rohingya influx.³²

These concerns—about the impact of a large population on a fragile ecosystem—surfaced time and again in conversations with both the host and refugee community. “The trees,” Abdul, a 70-year-old Bangladeshi from Rajapalong Union in Ukhiya said, “used to protect the village from the storms and the floods. When the trees went, the water started coming in. Now, in the rainy season, our fields all go under water, and our homes are flooded.”³³

Rohingya refugees, too, continue to feel the aftershocks of environmental damage. During the monsoon, the rains batter flimsy bamboo and tarpaulin shelters, causing waterlogging and shelter damage. When rains continue, the water often has nowhere to go, increasing risks of disease, and probabilities of landslides. Hamida, a single mother of four, lives in Balukhali camp, where a fire on March 2021 left 15 refugees dead and displaced over 48,000. When it rains, her shelter—perched precariously on a hill face—floods. The water seeps into drinking water, into food, and threatens to destroy important documents. Hamida has no relatives in the camps, and cannot leave.



Hamida, a single mother of four, lives in Balukhali camp, where a fire on March 2021 left 15 refugees dead and displaced over 48,000. When it rains, her shelter—perched precariously on a hill face—floods. The water seeps into drinking water, into food, and threatens to destroy important documents. Hamida has no relatives in the camps, and cannot leave.

Photo: Imrul Islam/ NRC

There is little doubt that the swift settlement of refugees came at the cost of ecological and environmental harm. In time, this has impacted the quality of life of both refugees, and the immediate host community. It has also impacted the delicate balance of a fragile coastal ecosystem, where the weather affects every aspect of how people live. The grievances voiced by both refugees and the host community are rooted in real, immediate and long-term concerns, and demand—as Part II of this report shows—an intentional centering of peacebuilding programming in humanitarian response.

32 Ibid.

33 All names have been anonymized to protect identities.

Labour Market

In the early phases of the response, a large number of time bound, temporary construction jobs meant a high demand for local workers. Rigorous labour market analysis—internally conducted by INGOs—informed procurement decisions for every sector in line with Bangladesh labour laws. In each case, emphasis was placed on employing locals, and sourcing required material from local markets, through local contractors. This combination of need and demand meant that for a while, the local labour market thrived.

In the intervening years, according to a 2018 UNDP report³⁴, refugee volunteers have increasingly taken these jobs. In conversation with locals—especially male respondents from the host community—it is clear that there is a sense of “a loss of income.” The reasons, according to multiple NGO practitioners working in the response, are twofold: refugee inclusion in the activities that shape their surroundings; and the reality of strict guidelines that govern who can get into the camps, and who cannot. For Rahmat, a 35-year-old Bangladeshi resident of Jalia Palong, opportunities for informal temporary work have decreased—“I used to work on construction activities in the camps, but now, it is very hard to get those jobs.”

For low-income host communities, as prices of essentials have increased, the absence of informal work has had a tangible impact on income and in turn, quality of life. A study by a consortium of local and international NGOs along with UN agencies found that since 2017, the poverty gap had increased in both Teknaf and Ukhiya.³⁵ For day labourers in the host community, this shift has meant reduced opportunities to contribute to the response. Interestingly, impressions from small scale businesses in the region also reveal exploitative labour practices. As a salt farmer in Ukhiya revealed:

“I prefer hiring cheap labourers from the Rohingya community. It does not bother me from which community and whom I am hiring. I am happy with the low-paid labourers.”

The impact of Covid-19, too, cannot be discounted. Since April 2020, Bangladesh has instituted rolling lockdowns to halt the spread of the virus. Due to global vaccine shortages, and unequal global vaccine distribution, these shutdowns have been forced to continue— affecting both the formal and informal economy. This uncertainty around livelihood has been felt in both the host and refugee community, with assessments revealing that as earnings plummeted, households are spending less, and some are at increasing risk of hunger.³⁶ Neither were these vulnerabilities unique to the host community. Income anxiety significantly increased among the Rohingya community in the first two months of 2021, attributable to increased economic vulnerabilities, the adoption of high risks coping mechanisms, and decreased ability of the community to absorb potential shocks.³⁷

Aid agencies, both national and international, overwhelmingly source material from local contractors, and employ Bangladeshi nationals to run programs. For example, according to self-reported data by agencies in 2019, 66% of all staff engaged in the Rohingya response were local. The two agencies engaged in this report, NRC and IRC, have teams with 94% and 99% nationals respectively, with Bangladeshis in key decision-making positions. However, while employees are Bangladeshi, including from Chittagong division, a large portion of NGO workers are from cities, and not from the immediate host community of Teknaf and Ukhiya. The result: a widening rift within the local community across socioeconomic lines, and between the local and refugee community on perceived inequality in opportunities and access to resources. These tensions, in turn, have been exacerbated by emergent cultural and political fault lines.

However, as Part II notes, it is important to differentiate tensions resulting from the Rohingya presence and tensions related to the way the response has been managed, for example those related to employment, since mitigating the impacts of each requires different interventions.



A section of the camps shows the density of settlements.

Photo: IRC

“

Findings reveal an additional layer of tension—a deepening of existing disparities in income, whereby opportunities for low-income work have decreased while opportunities for medium income work have increased.”

34 *Impacts of the Rohingya Refugee Influx on Host Communities*. UNDP (1 November 2018). <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/bangladesh/docs/Publications/Pub2019-/Impacts20%of20%the20%Rohingya20%Refugee20%Influx20%on20%Host20%Communities.pdf>.

35 *Self-reliance Situation of Host Communities in Cox's Bazar*. BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (2018). <https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/publications/self-reliance-situation-of-host-communities-in-coxs-bazar/>.

36 *COVID-19 Situation Analysis: Bangladesh*. iMMAP (March 2021). https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/iMMAP_COVID19_-_Bangladesh_Analysis20%Report_032021.pdf.

37 Ibid.

Cultural and political landscape

How are the social and political dimensions of life in local communities affected by refugees? The link between cultural and political difference and successful social cohesion are clear: personal, cultural, and political factors are key in determining how different communities can coexist together.³⁸

There is much that is common between the host and refugee community in Cox's Bazar. Both groups are majority Sunni Muslim. Food in particular is a strong connector, with dried fish and rice staples in both cuisines. The World Food Programme has brought together local Bangladeshi fishermen and refugees through its programmes. Through the programme, Rahim, a local fisherman, is able to sell his stock through the World Food Programme's e-voucher outlets which serve 97 percent of Rohingya refugees living in camps.³⁹

But there are also differences—perceived and/or real—in ways of living that continue to be sources of tension. Our findings indicate that some of the most frequent cultural grievances of the host community in Cox's Bazar include, but are not limited to, unregistered marriages, polygamy, perceived immorality, high Rohingya birth rates, and social interactions with refugees.

“Overwhelmingly, we found strong gender bias in perspectives on cultural “clashes”—with perspectives of male respondents at odds with perspectives of female respondents from the host community. As one member of the Cox's Bazar Press Club put it, “Local women are joining NGOs, which in turn is affecting the local culture.” Another, a member of the Ukhiya Upazila Parishad opined, “as a result of the arrival [of refugees and NGOs], women are no longer maintaining the veil. NGOs provide various assistance to women. Women have to go outside the house to bring them. This is increasing unrest in the families.”

These perspectives are shared to a degree by male Rohingya respondents as well, who report misgivings about women going outside households to work—a phenomenon they attribute to programmes run by NGOs. **However, as Part II elaborates, the “cultural clash” here is between the local community and the humanitarian response, not between the host community and refugees.**

38 Veronika Fajth, Özge Bilgili, Craig Loschmann and Melissa Siegel. “How do refugees affect social life in host communities? The case of Congolese refugees in Rwanda.” *Comparative Migration Studies* 7, no. 1 (2019): 1-21.

39 Atanu Sarma. “Social cohesion: When food offers an occasion for bonding”. World Food Programme Insight (5 October 2020). <https://medium.com/world-food-programme-insight/social-cohesion-when-food-gives-the-taste-of-bonding-e1c748e13296>.



Noorun Nahar, a learning facilitator, with her students. While all Rohingya children and adolescents are barred from formal schooling, girls face additional barriers to accessing education in the camps.

Photo: Imrul Islam/ NRC

Female respondents, on the other hand, reported that for them, there were no significant cultural conflicts with refugees at all. Rather, they raised concerns about resource distribution, namely: water sharing, firewood for cooking, and rumors of refugees receiving money from NGOs during Covid-19.⁴⁰ In line with government guidelines, refugees do not receive cash assistance, but they are eligible for work reimbursements. As Part II elaborates, our findings support a recent report on Saferworld on the necessity of centering gender in social cohesion inquiry and programming.⁴¹

Importantly, female respondents also highlighted the fencing in of camps as a significant source of tension between communities. While the detrimental impact of the fence on refugee lives and livelihoods has been well documented,⁴² the impact of the fence on refugee relationships has remained understudied. In particular, the fence has exacerbated safety and access issues in times of crisis. In the aftermath of devastating fires in March 2021, reports alleged refugees fleeing flames had been trapped and were unable to reach safety due to the fencing.⁴³ The fence has also demarcated—at times erroneously— refugee space from host space in a congested area. On the ground, this meant that some houses of host community members were fenced in, separated from land, significantly reducing access to services and increasing frustration.

40 In line with government regulations, Rohingya refugees cannot receive cash assistance, but there are limited cash-for-work programmes for refugee volunteers.

41 *Doing Right by Women and Girls in Cox's Bazar*. Saferworld (July 2021). <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1353-doing-right-by-women-and-girls-in-coxas-bazar-gendering-perspectives-on-social-cohesion>.

42 "Bangladesh: Refugee Camp Fencing Cost Lives in the Blaze." Human Rights Watch. (25 March 2021) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/25/bangladesh-refugee-camp-fencing-cost-lives-blaze>.

43 "INGO Joint Statement on the Fires in the Rohingya Camps in Cox's Bazar". Action Contre la Faim et al. (24 Marc 2021). <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/ingo-joint-statement-fires-rohingya-camps-coxs-bazar>.

The fence was the Bangladesh government's response to a rise in crime in Teknaf and Ukhiya. The steady deterioration of safety has been well documented, and remains an issue of pressing concern to all key stakeholders in the response. In particular, several "high profile" incidents have had detrimental effects on host-refugee relations.⁴⁴

Over the last four years, at least 725 criminal cases have been filed against Rohingya refugees.⁴⁵ Between January 2019 and July 2020, a total of 103 Rohingya refugees were reportedly been killed in "gunfights with law enforcement". In each case, incidents were attributed to drug and human trafficking, assault, rape or possession of arms or narcotics.⁴⁶ Incidents of Gender Based Violence (GBV) has also increased across camps,⁴⁷ and has threatened to spill out of control during each of the rolling Covid-19 lockdowns. These protection concerns have been met largely with a securitized response by authorities.

A lone tree rises above Balukhali camp, where families have been divided by a barbed wire fence. On the right, temporary shelters have been constructed for families affected by the March 22 fire.

Photo by Rohingya refugee Yassin Abdumonab



44 "Rohingya refugees shot dead by Bangladesh police during gunfight". The Guardian (24 August 2019). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/25/rohingya-refugees-shot-dead-by-bangladesh-police-during-gunfight>.

45 Muktadir Rashid. "Many Rohingyas get involved in crimes". New Age Bangladesh (25 August 2020). <https://www.newagebd.net/article/114440/many-rohingyas-get-involved-in-crimes>.

46 Ibid.

47 Kettie Jean and Jason Milks. "Preventing a silent crisis for Rohingya women and girls during COVID-19 pandemic". United Nations Children's Fund (29 April 2020). <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/preventing-silent-crisis-rohingya-women-and-girls-during-covid-19-pandemic>.

Land

In Teknaf and Ukhiya, almost 900,000 refugees live in approximately 34 camps in an area spanning about 26 square kilometres. These camps that weave between (and at times through) host communities are not just the largest in the world, they are also one of the most congested.⁴⁸ According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are almost 40,000 people per square kilometre in Cox's Bazar, making it forty times more crowded than the average population density of Bangladesh.⁴⁹ For communities dependent on the land for shelter and food, land access and use continue to be a source of conflict. According to Mostafiz, a Ukhiya resident whose family has lived in the area for generations,

"Our trees, the lands our ancestors farmed in, is gone. The trees are gone, the farms are gone. I used to grow seasonal crops, but now, I struggle to make ends meet as a day labourer."

Stories like Mostafiz's are everywhere in Teknaf and Ukhiya, and signal ambiguity in perceptions around land (re)allocation and rights. For refugees, access to land remains severely limited and fraught with complications. The majority of the land on which the refugee camps were constructed have been allocated by the government since 2017.⁵⁰ As there are no laws or administrative procedures governing refugees and stateless persons in Bangladesh, nor laws or procedures specifically defining Rohingya legal status, the Rohingya fall under the general laws applicable to all non-citizens.⁵¹ As none of these Acts or other applicable laws prohibit foreigners/non-citizens from leasing land the Rohingya are therefore legally allowed to lease land.

However, because there are no formal guidelines in place, nor any legal guardrails to fall back on, the potential for miscommunication, misrepresentation, and exploitation is high. In October 2020, as Covid-19 stretched response in the camps, agencies received news that 65 Rohingya households in camp 24 were on the verge of being evicted by the landowner.⁵² Refugees were in tenuous position as the agreement they had entered into in 2017 with this landowner was only verbal. Through a coordinated, inter-agency effort, the timeline for eviction was renegotiated, which afforded agencies and refugees time to find new land to lease.

Land related tensions have also increased due to relocations because of the fence. As Hafez, a resident of Camp 24 recounts:

“When the fence came up, we were moved from one side of the road to the other. The land on the east side of the road, where we lived for four years, was in great condition to live. We had a good relationship with the locals there, but we were forced to move by authorities. We are trying to adjust again, but it is hard. We feel like intruders who keep moving time and time again.”

Ambiguity around ownership and usage continues to impact host-refugee relations. The vast majority of land rights in Bangladesh are informally held, especially those held by Rohingya refugees. Leasehold is one of the most common types of property ownership in Bangladesh.⁵³ In broad terms, land tenure is often classified according to whether it is "formal" or "informal". Formal property rights to land may be regarded as those that are explicitly acknowledged by the state and which may be protected using legal means. Informal property rights are those that lack official recognition and protection. In some cases, informal property rights are illegal, i.e. held in direct violation of the law (for instance, when squatters occupy a site in contravention of an eviction notice). In other cases, property rights may be "extra-legal", i.e. not against the law, but not recognized by the law. According to the MSNA 2019, lease agreements between Rohingya refugees and host communities are fairly common with approximately 57% in Teknaf and 3% in Ukhiya camps paying rent to landowners (or others sub-letting land). Almost all of these arrangements, however, are undocumented.⁵⁴ In the absence of refugee access to formal judicial systems, NGOs have stepped up programming to facilitate critical negotiations between refugees and the host community. This includes, but is not limited to, land leasing and forced eviction of refugees, which can often scar relationships if not handled formally.

However, NGO programming cannot replace official judicial mechanisms. At its most extreme, some have raised fears of "Rohingya plans to take over Cox's Bazar, and then Bangladesh." While no evidence exists to support these claims, these extreme positions, amplified often by local and national media, continue to modulate host-refugee interactions to some extent.

48 Kathryn Reid. "Rohingya refugee crisis: Facts, FAQs, and how to help". World Vision (25 March 2021). <https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/rohingya-refugees-bangladesh-facts#:~:text=After%20fleeing%20violence%20in%20Myanmar,shelters%20with%20only%20one%20room.>

49 Saidul Hoque. "If COVID-19 arrives in the camps, it will be devastating". United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (21 April 2020). <https://www.unhcr.org/ph/18851-covid19-rohingya.html>.

50 "Government allocates 2,000 acres for Rohingyas". The Daily Star (11 September 2017). <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/govt-allocates-2000-acres-rohingyas-1460356>.

51 Foreigners Act of 1946, Foreigners Order of 1951, etc.

52 Internal briefs shared by INGOs on condition of anonymity.

53 Other formally recognized tenure categories are: freehold, Khas land, Public land under ownership of Municipality/City Corporation, Public land under ownership of various government agencies, Waqf administered land and Trust land.

54 Internal INGO assessments of the state of land rights and ownership in Teknaf and Ukhiya.

Humanitarian Presence

Since 2017, one of the most visible aspects of the crisis has been the non-governmental organizations tasked with the response. The way these agencies' function, interact, and communicate directly influences perceptions of both refugees and their hosts.

In Ukhiya, before 2017, the rent of a small two-bedroom apartment was 3,500 BDT. Now, four years into the response, rent for the same apartment has increased to 10,000 BDT. Similar hikes have impacted small business owners like Mamun's bakery in Teknaf:

"I run a small bakery. Since 2010, I have paid 3000 BDT (36 USD) per month for the space. But then, suddenly, in November 2018, the landowner requested me to leave that space and look for space somewhere else because he found one NGO to rent that space for double the amount I paid."

IRC staff seen talking to refugee women to assess needs immediately after the massive fires in March, 2021.

Photo by IRC



These stories are anything but uncommon. The impact of NGO presence on rent hikes, price of essentials and traffic congestions is well documented, as are perceived grievances related to NGOs delivering aid disproportionately, "favouring refugees", and impacting the cultural and social fabric of Ukhiya and Teknaf. There are also some indications that since NGOs started operating in Cox's Bazar, a demand for applicants without diplomas might have contributed to an increase in high school dropout rates.⁵⁵

Does that mean NGOs are detrimental to Cox's Bazar? Since UN agencies and NGOs came to Teknaf and Ukhiya, inclusion of host community in the response has created opportunities for local employment and investment. For construction of temporary shelters, NGOs source bamboo from local partners. In 2019, the first large scale bamboo treatment plant in Bangladesh was opened in Ukhiya to cater to the demand, creating jobs for the local community.⁵⁶ The dried fish industry, too, has grown to meet a growing demand in the camps. As WFP detailed in a recent report:

"Mukul, a scientist from another part of the country, set up a dried fish factory in Cox's Bazar to meet the demand from the refugee camps. He started producing this high-protein fish in a chemical-free and organic way. After being trained on how to process the fish, 30 people from the host community work in this factory and receive employee benefits including medical insurance in addition to their salary. Over time the business has created many job opportunities for the local population."⁵⁷

On the ground, responses indicate the reality is more nuanced, with perceptions of NGO activities and impact varying greatly. "When NGOs first came," Rahima, a host community resident says, "they treated us in a way that made us feel unwelcome in our own land. But since then, they have consulted us, improved infrastructure, and made health facilities. I now hear that 30 per cent of aid is being used for Bangladeshis."

Others, like a Union Parishad Member from Teknaf upazila, point to NGOs for a "degradation of conservative lifestyle." "Since NGOs moved in," he says, "every house in this area has at least one NGO worker. Female members of households are taking jobs that are not in line with our practices." Consistently, we find these perspectives indicate the need for gender sensitive programming, and—for the ambit of this project—a conscious disentanglement of core grievances from gender bias.

Over 140 local, national and international NGOs work in the Rohingya response in Cox's Bazar, operating across programs, clusters, and sectors to ensure aid reaches refugees and host community members. According to voluntary self-reported data by NGOs in the response, over 60% of all staff are Bangladeshi nationals. The two agencies engaged in this report, NRC and IRC, are comprised of teams with 94% and 99% nationals respectively, with Bangladeshi nationals employed in key decision-making positions. As an NGO worker who has been part of the response since 2017 put it, "The model, like all models, is far from perfect. Each organization is different—with different core competencies, different donor requirements, and different programming—but NGOs working in Cox's Bazar are guided by one overarching vision: to do no harm as we try to alleviate human suffering. We understand the grievances, and we value the feedback we receive from our beneficiaries. Every day, they inform the way we work."

55 Data collected from Teknaf Upazila Education Office on 27 January 2021.

56 "BRAC and UNHCR Open Cox's Bazar's First Bamboo Treatment Plant. BRAC (19 January 2019). <https://www.bracuk.net/2019/01/24/brac-and-unhcr-open-coxs-bazars-first-bamboo-treatment-plant/>.

57 Atanu Sarma. "Social cohesion: When food offers an occasion for bonding". World Food Programmed Insight (5 October 2020). <https://medium.com/world-food-programme-insight/social-cohesion-when-food-gives-the-taste-of-bonding-e1c748e13296>.

Part II: Host Community Relations

Refugees are often blamed for breakdowns in social cohesion. However, a wealth of research suggests that, if given opportunities, refugees can generate economic, social and cultural benefits for host countries. For example, livelihoods programming can restructure the way communities interact by providing avenues for economic interdependence between people. Education has also proven to be a strong connector and promoter of peace, even in countries like Sri Lanka where communities had been divided by violent conflict for decades.⁵⁸ Connections between social cohesion and peace, too, are clear. Communities where differences are acknowledged and sameness amplified are more resilient to shocks such as violent conflict.⁵⁹ A society characterized by trust, accountability and inclusion is ultimately a more peaceful and secure place for all.

Nevertheless, the presence of refugees typically increases anxiety amongst host communities. Material deprivations, challenges and constraints play a part; as do xenophobia and demonization.⁶⁰ This is true in Teknaf and Ukhiya. Our findings confirm that tensions, sometimes escalating into conflict, exist between refugee and host communities. Across three issues—the environment, land use and the labour market—there continues to be direct competition between communities. The deterioration of safety and security in the camps and surrounding areas also remains a serious source of tension. According to protection monitoring by IRC, “a number of complaints have been made about armed groups and gangs who patrol the camps in the night threatening many, extorting money, and leaving others critically beaten.”⁶¹ Over the past six months, there has been a reported rise in abductions and cases of missing persons.

Covid-19 has exacerbated vulnerabilities, and magnified differences between refugees and the host community. Over a year of rolling lockdowns, many members of both communities have lost jobs and access to livelihoods. Indebtedness has increased, as has hunger and frustration.⁶² In particular women and children have borne the brunt of the impact, including heightened protection risks. According to protection monitoring report by IRC increased criminality has resulted in heightened harassment, physical abuse, extortion and kidnapping within the camps and surrounding areas.⁶³ Inadequate street lighting is a problem across camps. With many areas unlit at night, women and girls report feeling anxious and scared to use communal WASH facilities. These risks—all easily mitigated by intentional programming—has been made much harder by Covid-related restrictions. Lockdowns have severely limited the presence of NGOs in Teknaf and Ukhiya (in camps and within the host community), leaving communities without adequate support. As need has skyrocketed, assistance has diminished.

Notwithstanding persistent tensions between refugees and hosts, our analysis of the cultural and political landscape in Ukhiya and Teknaf does not show significant conflict, nor immediate risks of violent conflict. Nor do our findings support the widely reported position that the host communities in Teknaf and Ukhiya are universally opposed to refugees living in the area. Rather than a singular host-refugee dynamic, there is evidence of significant variance within and between communities. While some host community members oppose the presence of refugees, a much larger portion of respondents are either supportive, ambivalent or balanced in their views. Perceptions—in both the refugee and host communities—also differ depending on whether respondents identify as female or male.

58 Harsha Aturupane and Damaris Wikramanayake. *The promotion of social cohesion through education in Sri Lanka*. World Bank (1 September 2011). <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/264731468302393983/the-promotion-of-social-cohesion-through-education-in-sri-lanka>.

59 Ibid.

60 Although outside the ambit of the current project, the impact of xenophobia and media coverage is well established. See e.g. *Countering Xenophobia and Stigma to Foster Social Cohesion in the COVID 19 Response and Recovery*. International Organization for Migration (14 July 2020). https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/countering_xenophobia_and_stigma_130720.pdf.

61 IRC protection monitoring report (internal) (July 2021).

62 J. Rieger. *Navigating at the Margins: Family, Mobility and Livelihoods Amongst Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*. Asia Foundation (August 2020). <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Navigating-the-Margins-Family-Mobility-and-Livelihoods-Amongst-Rohingya-in-Bangladesh.pdf>.

63 IRC protection monitoring report (internal) (June 2021).

Across issue areas, female respondents were more likely to emphasize material needs and barriers to social cohesion; while male respondents were more likely to stress anxieties around gender roles, cultural considerations and perceived threats to morality.

The disconnect between community views and prevalent media reporting suggests that public narratives about the continued presence of Rohingya refugees have become politicized.⁶⁴ Since 2018, studies have found that Bangladeshi news outlets have repeatedly used negative stereotypes, characterizing refugees as “baby boomers”, “disease carriers” or “violent”.⁶⁵ Coverage of this kind has impacted host-refugee relations, distracting policymakers from responding to real needs and significantly shrinking opportunities for cooperation.

Importantly, we also find that grievances toward refugees are routinely conflated with grievances toward the humanitarian presence. While limited land, labour and resources put host communities and refugees in direct competition, many complaints around perceived cultural and political impacts do not concern refugees per se, but rather UN agencies and NGOs supporting the response. These challenges to social cohesion require alternative approaches. For example, studies looking at the impact of NGOs on host-refugee relationships in Ethiopia have found that involving host communities in projects to benefit them is one of the most effective methods of promoting cohesion.⁶⁶

In Bangladesh, a similar model is being implemented, where NGOs working in education, legal aid and protection programming are increasingly expanding their ambit to include host communities in Teknaf and Ukhiya. The Joint Response Plan (JRP), too, includes language and funding provisions to support host communities. In late July, when extreme weather flooded the region, for example, humanitarian agencies adopted an inclusive rapid response that provided services to both refugees and affected Bangladeshis. Education programmes also currently concentrate on ensuring learning continuity in refugee camps while supporting Bangladeshi schools to reopen safely after the pandemic. In the future, a more expansive and inclusive protection plan might also draw in private sector investors to the local context to create more employment opportunities, thus helping to reduce disparities within refugee-host communities.



“As a Rohingya, I feel what my community wants and needs is education. It is our ladder to a better life. If Rohingya have access to quality education, I believe there will not be any violence, polygamy, domestic violence, child marriage, child labour, gender inequality and any of the other issues we are seeing nowadays. Education is the main source to stop all these activities.”

Photo: Imrul Islam/ NRC

64 B. Mohanty. *Understanding Media Portrayal of Rohingya Refugees*. In: *Citizenship, Nationalism and Refugeehood of Rohingyas in Southern Asia*. 2020. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2168-3_5.

65 M. Wadud. *Good Rohingyas, Bad Rohingyas: How Narratives of Rohingya Refugees Shifted in Bangladesh Media, 2017-2019*. Doctoral diss., University of Nevada-Reno (2020).

66 See e.g., Hermela Getachew. *Role of Humanitarian Organizations in Ensuring Peaceful Coexistence between Host Communities and Refugees*. Master's thesis, St. Mary's University School of Graduate Studies (August 2020). <http://www.repository.smuc.edu.et/bitstream/123456789/5786/1/Hermela%20Getachew%20%281%29.pdf>.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Four years is a long time. During the four years the Rohingya have spent in Bangladesh, children have been born in the camps without a country to call home. Refugees have died and been buried far away from the lands of their ancestors. Day after day, almost 900,000 people have seen the multiplicity of their lives reduced to headlines, or worse, disappear slowly from the collective conscience of the world.

A recent report by Saferworld documents how the gendered dimensions of social cohesion have been de-prioritized, and how some measures meant to promote social cohesion have actually been harmful to women and girls. Governance structures, like the *majhi* system for example, are biased toward men, often privileging cohesion over the safety and welfare of women and girls. The report also notes a backlash among men threatened by perceptions that humanitarian responders have empowered women and girls to engage in public life and participate in decision-making that affects them.

Children and adolescents, too, are at risk of becoming a lost generation. It has been four years since 450,000 children have seen the inside of a formal school—many have never been to a school in the entirety of their lives. Across densely populated camps, childhoods have been reduced to narrow alleys and dingy shelters, with a small percentage of children able to access learning opportunities through NGO programming. Since the first cases of Covid-19 were detected, these too have been forced to curtail activities due to strict restrictions, leaving children with little support at a critical juncture of their lives.

The elderly, specifically Extremely Vulnerable Individuals (EVIs) are also at risk. The hilly terrain of Teknaf and Ukhiya, the extreme weather patterns of the region, and the lack of monitoring and support mean elderly Rohingya are often left behind. Although health facilities have been ramped up to respond to Covid-19, pandemic focused services mean other health needs continue to go unmet across the camps.

This report identifies five sources of tension between the host and refugee community: ecology, land use, labour market, cultural and political pressures, and NGO presence. Further, we find a clear distinction between material and perceived grievances, where communities are in direct competition over land, labour and the environment, but perceive conflict that is attributed to NGO presence and a changing cultural and political landscape.

In light of these findings, we recommend the following:

- **International donors and NGOs** should address the ecological impact of refugee settlements in Teknaf and Ukhiya through short-term livelihoods programmes in the host community. Supporting host communities is crucial to fostering a positive relationship between host Bangladeshis and refugees, and between communities and NGOs. A joint programme by IOM and FAO that was launched in 2018 provides a replicable model: to provide high quality, nutritious food; increase income for local farmers; and contribute to the regeneration of the local forest.
- **International donors and NGOs** should improve access to coordinated dispute resolution mechanisms for host and refugee communities. Currently, dispute resolution within the refugee community and between the refugee and host community remains ad-hoc and untransparent, with already overstretched camp officials taking on the role of informal arbitrators. NGOs with dedicated legal aid programming can be mobilized to a. mediate disputes over land; and b. train community leaders to become mediators.
- **The Government of Bangladesh, international donors and NGOs** should establish a system of local focus and community consultations on inter-communal relations and local needs as part of social cohesion programming. For social cohesion programming to be successful, community buy-in is critical. The implementation of interventions should be preceded by consultations with local government officials, union members, the RRRC, and a representative cross section of the target community. For example, before Alternate Dispute Resolution programming is designed for Ukhiya, programming should be informed by the specific needs—not just of the sub-district at large but the target unions in which it will operate. This should include consultations with Union Parishads and Upazila Parishads, upazila officials, *majhis*, CiCs, and village courts.
- **All relevant actors should center** gender sensitivity as a cornerstone of all social cohesion interventions. For all actors, it is imperative to ensure programming is not reinforcing male-dominated structures; that inclusion of women is not tokenistic; and that social cohesion analysis and programming does not exclude those who are transgender and/or gender non-binary. For example, a coordinated dispute resolution mechanism that excludes women is not just an impediment to peace, but an active driver of interpersonal conflict.



As the conditions of camps deteriorate, refugees feel like they are intruders with no place left to turn. Nahar, who has been Bangladesh since 1992, has spent almost two decades of her life unmoored from home. For her, almost decades later, return is not a question of “if”, but “when”—“The local people claim the Rohingya don’t want to go home, but our main goal is to be able to go home.”

- **The Government of Bangladesh** should designate vital protection services as essential to avoid disruption to life-saving services and address protection risks resulting from, and contributing to, community tensions. Over one year of rolling lockdowns in Teknaf and Ukhiya has restricted the presence of protection actors. On the ground, this means limited monitoring, programming, and interventions to ameliorate disputes, abuses, GBV, and other protection concerns. While foregrounding Covid-19 safety guidelines—and in conjunction with the vaccination drive in the camps—protection actors should be allowed back into the camps. Relatedly, it is vital to ensure securitization measures in response to increased criminality do not themselves become drivers for conflict.
- **The Government of Bangladesh and NGOs** should work towards expanding access to education for refugees and the host community. As Bangladesh accelerates vaccination, education programming should be reintroduced in the camps as schools are reopened in the region.

Seen in a shelter in the Kutapalong camps,, where children are organized by mentors for informal learning. "V" for "Voice".

Photo: Imrul Islam/ NRC





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