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**Rethinking Border Crisis: Responsible Responses to the Rohingya Crisis in Bangladesh**

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The massive and rapid influx of over 740,000 Rohingya refugees in the weeks following August 2017, fleeing mass violence in Myanmar, has dramatically reshaped the landscape of Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar district. The region now hosts nearly one million Rohingya, making it the world's largest refugee settlement. Apart from a humanitarian crisis per se, the influx also exposes how forced migration challenges fragile host communities and tests governance capacity. Integrated responses that bridge humanitarian aid and local development are crucial for targeting a sustainable pathway to wellbeing for both the displaced and host populations.

## **1. A Crisis Rooted in History**

The Rohingya, a stateless Muslim minority from Myanmar's Rakhine State, have faced decades of systematic discrimination, violence, and denial of citizenship.<sup>5</sup> Periodic waves of displacement date back to the late 1970s, but the 2017 military crackdown by the Myanmar military triggered an unprecedented mass exodus. Bangladesh, despite its poverty and high population density, opened its borders on humanitarian grounds and now – 8 years since 2017 – carries the weight of an unresolved crisis. Initial international attention had mobilized significant humanitarian assistance. Camps in Teknaf and Ukhiya Upazilas, the two sub-

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<sup>1</sup> Established in June 2017 by a cross-disciplinary research team, the Research Centre for Sustainable Hong Kong (CSHK) is an Applied Strategic Development Centre of City University of Hong Kong (CityU). CSHK conducts impactful applied research with the mission to facilitate and enhance collaborations among the academic, industrial and professional service sectors, the community and the government for sustainable development in Hong Kong and the Region.

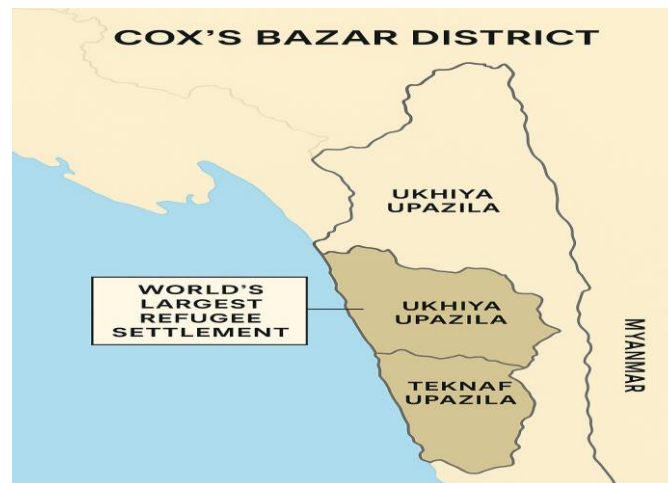
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<sup>5</sup> Habib, M. R. (2023). Rohingya refugee–host community conflicts in Bangladesh: Issues and insights from the “field”. *Development in Practice*, 33(3), 317-327.

districts of Cox's Bazar nearest the Myanmar border and bordering the Bay of Bengal (see Figure 1), mushroomed almost overnight. However, as other and more recent crises capture the global headlines, the Rohingya refugees and local host communities in Bangladesh remain deeply entangled in the complex realities of protracted displacement.



**Figure 1: Location of Ukhiya and Teknaf Upazilas in Cox's Bazar District, Bangladesh**

Source: Extracted and modified by the author from <https://data.humdata.org/dataset/outline-of-camps-sites-of-rohingya-refugees-in-cox-s-bazar-bangladesh>.

## 2. Widening Economic Fault Lines

The Rohingya influx has had profound implications for local livelihoods. Many refugees have joined the informal labour market as they were legally barred from formal employment. Rohingya men often work as daily labourers in agriculture, fishing, or small-scale construction, while women trade groceries and essentials in the camps.<sup>6</sup> This expanding labour pool has depressed wages for local workers, particularly day labourers who once relied on seasonal farm and salt-field work.<sup>7</sup> A UNDP report estimates that agricultural day wages in Ukhiya and Teknaf fell by up to 30% in the two years following the influx. Poorer households, especially female-headed families and youth, bear the brunt of this impact. Some have resorted to seeking precarious work in distant towns. Others ventured into high-risk but more lucrative sectors, such as smuggling and unregulated fishing.<sup>8</sup>

Paradoxically, humanitarian aid has also created new opportunities. UN agencies, INGOs, and local contractors procure various goods, ranging from food supplies to transport services and

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<sup>6</sup> Islam, M. T., Ahmed, B., Sammonds, P., Chakma, A., Patwary, O. H., Durrat, F., & Alam, M. S. (2022). The 2017 Rohingya influx into Bangladesh and its implications for the host communities. *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, 10(2), 487-512.

<sup>7</sup> Sultana, Z. (2023). Impact of Rohingya influx on host community's relations to places in Bangladesh. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 93, 101782.

<sup>8</sup> UNDP. (2018). *Impacts of the Rohingya refugee influx on host communities*. Dhaka: Bangladesh.

shelter materials.<sup>9</sup> This has spurred the growth of an ‘aid economy’ that benefits traders, transport owners, and local business elites. Some locals have launched new logistics, hospitality, and supply ventures to provide for the camps. However, the distribution of resultant economic benefits is highly uneven – wealthier families with connections or capital often reap the most benefits, while the poorest face rising food prices, housing rent inflation, and shrinking wage security.<sup>10</sup> This outcome challenges traditional resource competition models, demonstrating how the aid economy actively mediates and skews benefits, marginalizing the poorest host communities.

### **3. Environmental Fragility at Breaking Point**

Environmental damage is one of the starkest legacies of the refugee influx. Between 2017 and 2020, more than 6,000 acres of forest vegetation in Cox’s Bazar were cleared to accommodate shelters and road networks, and provide the firewood for consumption.<sup>11</sup> Deforestation has contributed to soil erosion and landslides, threatening agricultural fields and homesteads. Groundwater over-extraction to supply the additional camp population has lowered water tables, while inadequate waste disposal and sanitation lead to contamination of local water sources.<sup>12</sup> The host communities and refugees increasingly come into direct competition for diminishing resources of wood, water, and grazing land.

Local and international actors have responded with reforestation campaigns, solar energy promotion, and clean cooking projects. However, the scale remains small compared to the pace of environmental degradation. Without robust investment in eco-restoration and renewable solutions, the region risks losing its ecological buffer, with dire implications for disaster resilience and local livelihoods.

### **4. Complex Social and Cultural Entanglements**

While the Rohingya and the local populations share Islam as a dominant faith, subtle cultural, linguistic, and historical differences have led to divisive perceptions.<sup>13</sup> Some Bangladeshis perceive the Rohingya as culturally distinct – highlighting their being different – from the locals – the Rohingya are seen to be more conservative in social practices, language dialects, and communal identity. Such perceptions often fuel stereotyping and mistrust.

Media narratives and political discourse have sometimes amplified isolated incidents of violence or illegal activities by the Rohingya, such as smuggling, overshadowing the fact that

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<sup>9</sup> Guglielmi, S., Seager, J., Mitu, K., Baird, S., & Jones, N. (2020). Exploring the impacts of COVID-19 on Rohingya adolescents in Cox's Bazar: A mixed-methods study. *Journal of Migration and Health*, 1-2(100031): 1-7.

<sup>10</sup> Habib, *Op Cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Mukul, Sharif A., Saleemul Huq, John Herbohn, Ainun Nishat, A. Atiq Rahman, Raquibul Amin, and Farid Uddin Ahmed (2019). "Rohingya refugees and the environment." *Science*, 364(6436): 138.

<sup>12</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG). (2020). *Bangladesh: The humanitarian response to the Rohingya refugee crisis*. Retrieved from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/bangladesh/303-bangladesh-humanitarian-response-rohingya-refugee-crisis>.

<sup>13</sup> Habib, *Op Cit.*

actual crime rates linked directly to refugees remain low.<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, a sentiment of rising insecurity has led to calls for stricter surveillance on the refugees, with measures of fenced camps and mobility restrictions in all camps.

On the other hand, everyday interactions in markets, shared transportation, and NGO training activities have provided multiple venues for intermingling and inter-group communications. The aid economy provides local women with a new host of employment opportunities, which are welcomed by them while presenting a challenge to traditional gender roles. However, such impacts remain uneven and are often precarious as these jobs are temporary, dependent on short-term donor funding, and lack the security of formal employment contracts.<sup>15</sup> Younger generations in both communities also tend to exhibit greater tolerance and curiosity toward one another, compared to older residents.<sup>16</sup> Community leaders and local NGOs have played a crucial role in mediating tensions. Dialogues, inter-community sports, and cultural exchanges have proven moderately effective in reducing mistrust and defusing rumours. These local initiatives demonstrate that practical peacebuilding at the grassroots level is possible, but requires sustained investment of time, effort and resources.

## 5. Governance under Strain

Bangladesh's local governance system is under severe strain due to the pressures of the refugee influx. Union Parishads and Upazila Parishad offices<sup>17</sup> serve as the first line of dispute resolution and service provision; however, they were never adequately resourced for large-scale crisis management.<sup>18</sup> Local officials in a single unit of the local government often have to deal with over 100 agencies and organizations, including United Nations agencies like UNHCR, IOM, WFP, and UNICEF, and major INGOs such as Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee. They must balance complex relationships over land use and aid logistics. They are also tasked with coordinating between national authorities and international humanitarian workers.

The Bangladesh Government's stance on the Rohingya has remained consistent over the years, despite the domestic regime changes, – refugees are to be protected. However, they will be repatriated to Myanmar when conditions permit. However, repatriation talks have repeatedly stalled due to security conditions and Myanmar's political instability. A recent attempt by Bangladesh's interim government to pilot the return of 1,800 refugees in 2025 again faltered

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<sup>14</sup> Mojid, M. (2024). Problematizing the changing media narratives of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. In *Refugees and the Media: Local and Global Perspectives* (pp. 215-234). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.

<sup>15</sup> Hosen, S., & Shahria, G. (2020). Economic challenges of Rohingya peoples: A study on displacement (Rohingya) peoples on Myanmar in Cox's Bazar. *International Journal of Social, Political and Economic Research*, 7(3), 415-436.

<sup>16</sup> Sultana, *Op Cit*.

<sup>17</sup> Union Parishad is the lowest administrative tier of the existing local government in Bangladesh while the Upazila Parishad is the second lowest tier. At the top, there is Zila Parishad.

<sup>18</sup> Islam, S. (2025). Agency of the Refugees in Camp Governance: Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh. In *Reshaping Rohingya Futures: Coping Strategies and Emerging Agencies* (pp. 147-175). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.

amid concerns over safety and voluntariness.<sup>19</sup>

In the meantime, host communities have borne the brunt of inadequate integration measures. International donors and UN partners have begun linking humanitarian aid programmes with local development plans; however, these efforts remain fragmented. Stronger local governance support is also essential to bridge the humanitarian–development divide.

## 6. Comparative Lessons from Other Protracted Refugee Contexts

Bangladesh’s experience with the Rohingya crisis is not unique: countries like Uganda, Jordan, and Turkey face similar dilemmas balancing refugee protection, host community welfare, and long-term sustainability. Uganda’s open policy framework, for example, grants refugees freedom of movement and work rights, encouraging local economic participation.<sup>20</sup> However, even Uganda struggles with resource strain, land conflicts, and dependency in large settlements like Bidi Bidi.<sup>21</sup>

Jordan’s hosting of Syrian refugees shows parallel tensions. Increased labour supply in northern governorates has driven down wages for low-income Jordanians, echoing wage suppression in Cox’s Bazar.<sup>22</sup> Turkey, despite hosting over three million Syrians, faces domestic political backlash over jobs, identity, and security, mirroring Bangladesh’s subtle cultural anxieties and calls for stricter control.<sup>23</sup>

These cases underscore a clear lesson for forced migration theory: classic push–pull models explain why people flee but provide little insight into how host–refugee dynamics unfold over time.<sup>24</sup> The Bangladesh case demonstrates that local governance capacity, environmental management, and everyday social interactions determine whether a refugee community’s situation is on track for sustainable improvement or fuels new local resentment. Resource competition frameworks partly explain wage and land conflicts. However, they fail to account for how the aid economy and existing governance structures actively mediate and skew the distribution of benefits, often favoring well-connected local elites over the poorest host communities.<sup>25</sup> Social exchange dynamics – such as daily market contact and local NGO mediation – demonstrate that building trust amongst the displaced populations and local communities is achievable but an incremental and protracted process requiring sustained efforts and investment.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The Daily Star. (2025, April 8). Why Myanmar’s Rohingya repatriation plan rings hollow. Retrieved from <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/why-myanmars-rohingya-repatriation-plan-rings-hollow-3866381>.

<sup>20</sup> Betts, A., Bloom, L., Kaplan, J. D., & Omata, N. (2017). *Refugee economies: Forced displacement and development*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>21</sup> Omata, N. (2018). Refugees’ engagement with host economies in Uganda. *Forced Migration Review*, 58, 19–21.

<sup>22</sup> Lenner, K., & Turner, L. (2019). Making refugees work? The politics of integrating Syrian refugees into the labor market in Jordan. *Middle East Critique*, 28(1), 65–95.

<sup>23</sup> Mencutek, Z. S. (2022). The institutionalization of “voluntary” returns in Turkey. *Migration and Society*, 5(1), 43–58.

<sup>24</sup> Lee, E. S. (1966). A theory of migration. *Demography*, 3(1), 47–57.

<sup>25</sup> Betts et al., *Op Cit.*,

<sup>26</sup> Islam, *Op Cit.*,

## 7. A Closer Look at Emerging Local Initiatives

Some local experiments in Cox's Bazar have offered insights into how community resilience can be strengthened. For instance, local cooperatives have formed informal networks to negotiate better wages and access small grants from NGOs that integrate host communities into cash-for-work schemes.<sup>27</sup> Small women-led enterprises, such as tailoring or small shop ventures, have received modest support through joint UNDP and World Food Programme pilot projects that link livelihood training with local market demands.<sup>28</sup>

While these initiatives remain small in scale, they signal the potential for models that could be replicated in other protracted refugee situations. One promising example is the integration of host communities into camp supply chains, such as local vegetable growers supplying food to aid contractors, which has helped maintain agricultural income despite wage shocks.

Environmental pilot projects have also emerged. Joint reforestation drives, alternative fuel programs, and community-based natural resource management have been piloted in Teknaf to reduce illegal firewood collection.<sup>29</sup> However, these efforts often rely on short donor cycles and need stronger local government coordination and long-term investment.

## 8. Comparative Environmental Dimensions

Environmental impacts are another dimension where global parallels provide useful lessons. In Jordan's Zaatar camp, for example, over-extraction of groundwater has led to tensions with local farming communities.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in Cox's Bazar, competition over water, fuelwood and land mirrors this stress. However, Jordan's experimentation with solar energy and waste-to-energy plants in camps suggests how integrated environmental management can benefit both refugees and hosts.<sup>31</sup> Bangladesh could draw from these examples to expand renewable solutions at scale.

## 9. Towards an Integrated Resilience Approach

The Rohingya-in-Bangladesh case illustrates that the governance of forced migration cannot be siloed. Humanitarian aid alone will not solve deep-rooted inequalities or reverse environmental degradation. Without integrating refugee management with local development, the unintended consequences – wage suppression, resource depletion, and social frictions – will continue to strain communities on the front lines. Learning from comparative contexts, such as Uganda and Jordan, shows that well-managed rights-based approaches, clear livelihood pathways, and environmental stewardship can mitigate these impacts. The test for Bangladesh and international aid partners will be whether programmes oriented to near-term crisis management can evolve into a genuine resilience framework that sees host communities and

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<sup>27</sup> ICG, *Op Cit.*

<sup>28</sup> Hosen, S., & Shahria, G. (2020). Economic challenges of Rohingya peoples: A study on displacement (Rohingya) peoples on Myanmar in Cox's Bazar. *International Journal of Social, Political and Economic Research*, 7(3), 415-436.

<sup>29</sup> Mukul, et al, *Op Cit.*

<sup>30</sup> Lenner & Turner, *Op Cit.*

<sup>31</sup> Mencutek, *Op Cit.*

refugees as joint stakeholders in sustainable solutions. Given the extended duration of the Rohingya displacement, the urgency to go beyond the near-term approach is self-evident. The protracted nature of this displacement shows that local governance capacity, environmental sustainability, and community resilience are the decisive factors shaping outcomes for both refugees and hosts, underscoring the urgency to go beyond the near-term approach.

## **10. Pathways Forward: Policy and Practice**

First, any durable plan must link refugee protection with tangible support for host communities. Livelihood diversification – including skills training, micro-finance, and local market integration – can reduce wage competition and build resilience.

Second, environmental restoration must be scaled up. Lessons from Jordan’s renewable energy investments and Cox’s small pilots point to practical ways to reduce forest loss and safeguard water sources.

Third, fostering social cohesion through community dialogues, youth engagement, and support for local leaders can address tensions before they harden into conflict.

Finally, the global community must move beyond a temporary crisis response. Political pressure for safe repatriation must continue, but Bangladesh needs fair burden-sharing: sustained funding, third-country resettlement for the most vulnerable, and a recognition that the Rohingya are not just passive aid recipients but people with skills and agency.

**Bangladesh’s response to the Rohingya crisis highlights an uncomfortable truth in forced migration governance: humanitarian aid alone cannot secure host community resilience or refugee dignity. Without an integrated approach centring on development, the cycle of dependency and local strain will persist. Comparative experience shows that shared responsibility – across local communities, national leaders, and the international community – remains the only viable way forward. The lessons from these strained shores deserve urgent attention as the world confronts rising forced displacement in increasing numbers and regions amid climate risks and geopolitical conflicts.**