

Preventing a Lost Generation

Community-led education by Rohingya refugees

Forced displacement represents one of the biggest barriers to achieving Sustainable Development Goal #4 – ensuring quality education for all. In the fall of 2017, a brutal military campaign forced more than 700,000 Rohingya to leave their homes in Myanmar and seek refuge in Bangladesh, where they continue to live in overcrowded makeshift camps without formal refugee status. The humanitarian needs are enormous and access to formal schooling is challenged by multiple constraints. To address this gap, Rohingya-led networks of community teachers are organizing formal schooling classes to prevent a feared “lost generation” of young Rohingya. How can these networks help improve the humanitarian response for the benefit of Rohingya children and youth? In this brief, we explore what kinds of schooling these networks provide, and identify their motivations, competences, strengths, and challenges. We then suggest policy recommendations geared towards improving the humanitarian response on education.

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Brief Points

- The Rohingya refugee crisis is one of the world’s worst forced displacement situations.
- The humanitarian response on education is challenged by material, financial, and political constraints.
- Community-led education networks are formed by Rohingya refugees trying to fill the gap.
- These networks represent a wellspring of potential support to help humanitarian agencies reach more children, promote girls’ education, and advise education planning.

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Inadequate Education

Quality education is of vital importance to children caught in protracted displacement. A recent survey among Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh revealed that better education is among their top priorities for improvement of their life situation. Humanitarian agencies provide non-formal schooling programmes, but these agencies are challenged by severe material, financial, and political constraints.

The Rohingya crisis is a highly politicized context, and it has proven difficult to find sustainable and targeted solutions for refugee education for this population. The Government of Bangladesh fears that formal education in camps may obstruct the repatriation of Rohingya to Myanmar, or even attract more Rohingya to seek refuge in Bangladesh. Thus, formal education is firmly restricted for Rohingya children and youth who have arrived since 2017. Furthermore, there are also significant logistical challenges to developing an education system that can meet the needs of a large and diverse population of students.

On the Myanmar side, there are few signs that a safe repatriation can take place any time soon, and Rohingya refugees are highly concerned about their children's future should they end up

in a situation of protracted displacement with no access to adequate formal education. Rohingya community-based organizations have voiced strong dissatisfaction with the quality of the teaching provided by humanitarian agencies, and they fear that camp education programmes will not be recognized by the Myanmar government upon an eventual return.

Rohingya Education Networks

To get a clearer understanding of what Rohingya community leaders want and how they organize to meet the substantial formal education gap, we surveyed and interviewed 27 community-organized education networks consisting of 373 teachers who provide private teaching to 9,848 children and youth across the Kutupalong, Thangkhali, Balukhali, and Nayapara camp areas in the Cox's Bazar District of Bangladesh.

Most of the teachers are well educated by Myanmar standards. In 21 of the networks, most or all teachers have passed high school matriculation in Myanmar, and some of the teachers even have a university degree. The networks are comprised of both registered refugees who have spent most or all their lives in Bangladesh, and non-registered, newly arrived refugees. Most networks report previous teaching experience

in Myanmar government schools, community schools, or religious schools. They mainly teach primary learners, but the age span of the pupils ranges from 3 to 23 years of age.

Respondents from 18 of the networks report that they have received some teacher training. Among them, teachers in 4 networks were trained in Myanmar government teacher colleges; teachers in 11 networks received teacher training from NGOs or UN agencies; and teachers in 3 networks undertook Islamic teacher training. Teachers in nearly all networks say that they would like to receive more teacher training on internationally recognized teaching methodologies.

The majority of the networks teach from family shelters, but some use free-standing, simple classrooms, built with the support of private donors. Still others use the premises of religious schools (*madrassa* or *maktab*).

English is the most commonly taught subject, taught by 25 of the 27 networks, followed by Burmese language and Mathematics. Bangla language, the fourth most commonly taught subject, is mainly taught in the registered camps, where the use of Bangla in schools has been allowed by the government. Interestingly, the networks also cover additional subjects, such as history, physics, and geography. The humanitarian agencies' education programmes do not yet provide such subjects.

Most networks use a combination of Burmese, English, and Rohingya languages as mediums of instruction. All 27 networks use Rohingya to explain concepts and to lecture students, while 21 also teach partially in English and 21 teach partially in Burmese. Within a few networks, Rakhine language and Bangla are used. Amongst most networks, material resources are scarce, but the Myanmar government curriculum is by far the most commonly used set of textbooks.

21 networks run according to a full-time class schedule, teaching 5 or 6 days per week, while 6 others teach part-time, in the early mornings and evenings. Student attendance rates are generally high and consistent, with most respondents reporting an absentee rate of 5 to 10 percent. The most common reasons for truancy are children being busy with tasks such as collecting food rations or working odd jobs.



Figure 1: Border areas between Myanmar and Bangladesh, with Rohingya refugee arrivals as of September 2017. Source: Myanmar Information Management Unit

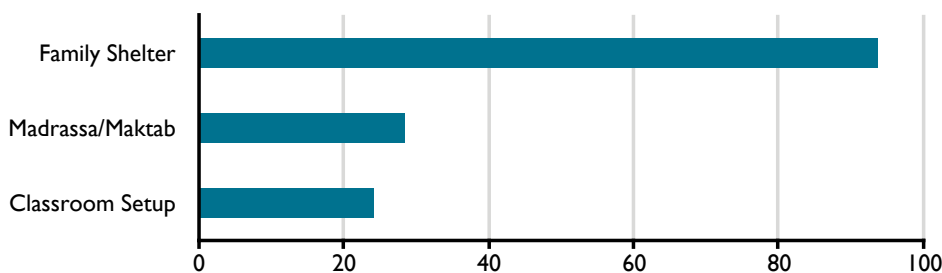


Figure 2: The 143 teaching spaces currently in use by networks included in the survey

In 12 of the networks, teachers receive no pay. In some cases, these teachers are unwilling to accept payment because they wish to provide a free service to the community, and some are teaching on their free time while working for NGOs during the day. The other 15 networks report that their teachers do earn at least some income from teaching services. The current average total earnings of a private tutor are nonetheless similar to what they earned prior to displacement. Parents usually pay a small tuition fee, but many of the poorest households do not have to pay.

Only 2 out of the 27 networks included in the survey have an ongoing relationship with an NGO in the camps, though neither acknowledged receiving financial or material support from those NGOs. Nearly all networks say that they would like to have a relationship with NGOs if it would mean they could receive support in the form of funding, materials, and/or teacher training.

15 networks say that camp authorities are aware of their teaching activities and allow them to teach openly despite the lack of formal authorization. The remaining 12 state that the camp authorities are unaware of their activities.

The Importance of Quality Education

Respondents widely express a fear that the lack of formal education in the camps is creating a “lost generation” of youth. They are concerned that the younger generation will lack the ability to speak Burmese and thus be unable to participate as Myanmar citizens in the future, adding to the existing political problems of the Rohingya in Myanmar.

Many of the educators speak of their efforts to raise awareness about the importance of education within the refugee community. Despite

most refugees’ lack of access to educational opportunities, the teachers nonetheless feel they have a duty to promote the value of education in the community so that families can at least come to value, if not access, education. Many speak of the role of education in helping young people develop positive values and learn to distinguish right from wrong.

“Quality education” is defined in two distinct ways by network respondents: on the one hand, as *systematic, formal academic training*, and on the other, *guidance to develop moral character*. Many respondents elaborate at length about the importance of refugee-led education. They place a strong value on the community’s ability to educate its own children and locate a sense of dignity in contributing to camp education.

Rohingya educators view access to education as an important component of their greater struggle for human rights and citizenship. While their access to Myanmar state institutions was restricted in countless ways, children’s participation in the Myanmar government education system was one of the most common – and perhaps most positively valued – ways in which Rohingya were exposed to and experienced a sense of belonging to a broader Myanmar culture. According to this view, students need to continue using the Myanmar government curriculum so that they can stay at their age-appropriate grade level and reintegrate into Myanmar schools after repatriation. They call for the Bangladesh Government to negotiate with Myanmar on issuing certification to follow the education system of Myanmar and stress the importance of using clear standards for grade promotion and grade-segregated classrooms. They also stress the importance of adhering to a formal curriculum. Most of the teachers still hope they will be able to return to Myanmar in the near future, despite the scepticism of many international and Bangladeshi observers regarding the likelihood

of a timely repatriation. However, those who acknowledge the possibility of remaining in the camps for many years still place a high value on the importance of following the Myanmar government curriculum.

The high value placed on systematic, formal education frames respondents’ largely negative views about the learning centres and learning provided by humanitarian agencies. Respondents call for clarity about the purpose and the necessity of learning materials being newly developed by the humanitarian agencies. They are concerned about the low likelihood of formality as camp education planning progresses. Receiving a standard education that adheres to the Myanmar government curriculum is seen as the only viable pathway toward future professional success. Most respondents say that they are not interested in being trained using the new material from the humanitarian agencies, and many also express doubts as to whether either Bangladesh or the United Nations have attempted to get Myanmar’s permission to use the Myanmar curriculum in the camps. Others are more understanding towards the need for new learning material, but appeal for more information and better communication between the humanitarian sector and the refugees. Teachers among the registered refugees are somewhat more positive about the new material, as they see it as a potential opportunity to learn Burmese and prepare for eventual repatriation.

Need for Better Cooperation

Improved community consultation is important to get acceptance from the education networks and community leaders about education planning, in order to avoid renewed tensions between refugees and the humanitarian agencies. Findings from our study suggest that there is a lack of systematic mapping and efforts by the humanitarian education sector to reach out to community educators. Few of the networks had met or spoken with an NGO staff member, and none of them had been consulted to give their inputs on education planning. However, most of them stated that they would like to receive training and engage more with the humanitarian sector, and since the publication of our findings, we see initial signs of improvement in communication and consultation between the networks and the sector. More confidence building and trust building is nonetheless needed to overcome tensions and misunderstandings, and

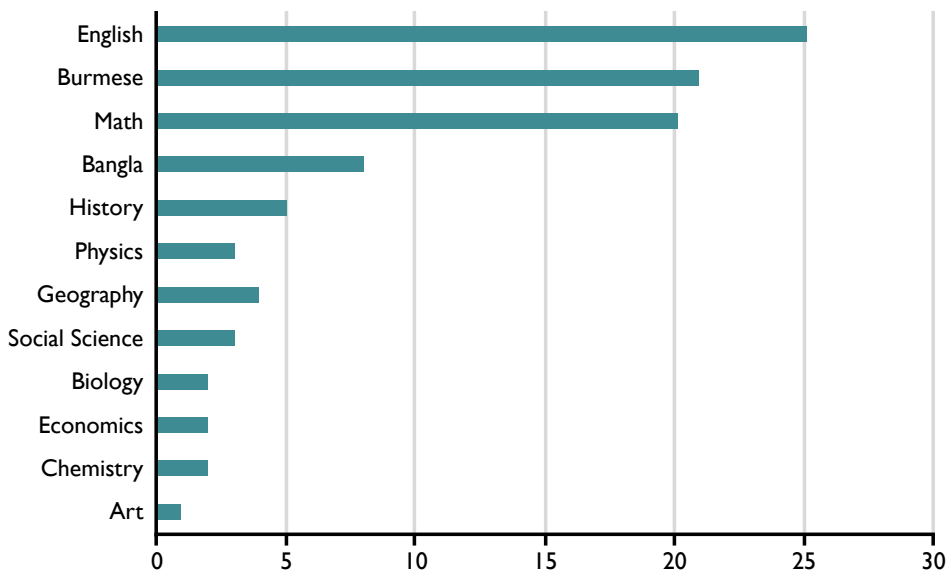


Figure 3: Networks included in the survey teaching different subjects

to clarify positions and aspirations, as well as to identify mutual expectations. It is important to ensure that the education programmes provided by the humanitarian agencies are well understood, endorsed, and targeted.

It is also important not to overlook the potential contributions to education programming that the resources of community educators represent. Humanitarian agencies experience scarcity of space for learning and could benefit from closer cooperation with the home-based and community-led education networks run by refugee teachers who have earned the community's trust. These networks and their teachers represent an educated wellspring of untapped resources with close ties to the refugee communities and insights into their grievances and aspirations. Their proficiency in Rohingya language, culture, and religion, and their profound knowledge of the Myanmar education system, the Myanmar society, and its political challenges, is invaluable. These networks have

the potential to help support the humanitarian agencies to reach more children and promote girls' education, as well as to advise further formal education planning.

Recommendations

Based on our findings, we offer the following recommendations:

- Humanitarian agencies and the Government of Bangladesh should engage Myanmar and work towards an agreement on the usage of the Myanmar government curriculum by Rohingya refugee students, and a process for the Myanmar high school matriculation exam to be invigilated and for matriculation certificates to be issued.
- The Government of Bangladesh is encouraged to permit refugees to conduct educational activities freely.

- The humanitarian agencies are encouraged to conduct participatory consultations with Rohingya refugee education leaders on the content and implementation of the new Guidelines on Informal Education Programming Framework. The inputs of Rohingya educators should be considered on matters such as language of instruction, and minimum formal education level of camp teachers, and to ensure that the grade promotion process mirrors that of the Myanmar education system.
- The Education Sector should provide oral and written briefs in accessible language to update refugees on the status of formal education planning, including the challenges that have caused delays in the rollout of programming.
- Coordination structures between representatives from the community networks and the Education Sector should be formed in an inclusive and transparent manner.
- Refugee educators should make every effort to mainstream girls' access to community education. In parallel, humanitarian actors should provide guidance to community education networks on gender mainstreaming and strategies for the engagement of girls. ■

Further Reading

- Olney, Jessica; Nurul Haque & Roshid Mubarak (2019) 'We Must Prevent a Lost Generation: Community-led education in Rohingya camps', *PRIO Paper*. Oslo: PRIO.
- Wake, Barbelet and Skinner (2019) 'Rohingya refugees' perspectives on their displacement in Bangladesh: Uncertain futures', *Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper*.

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THE PROJECT

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