



Insecurity, Risk and Resilience

The Contributions and Challenges of Refugee-led Initiatives in Rohingya Refugee Camps in Bangladesh

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Photography

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Cover image: A Rohingya refugee woman and her child at the wind of their shelter, Cox's Bazar District.

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Executive summary

Refugee-led initiatives (RLIs) often provide important services and support to refugees and other communities around the world. Yet, there is generally a lack of evidence detailing how this support is provided, and the systemic barriers RLIs face when undertaking this work. Drawing on fieldwork interviews conducted with refugee leaders and representatives in 2022, this report provides the first detailed analysis of the experiences of RLIs working in the Rohingya refugee camps of Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, near the Bangladesh–Myanmar border. The report finds that:

- o **Large-scale displacement to Bangladesh in 2017 led to the emergence of more than 20 RLIs in the Rohingya refugee camps.** These new RLIs have worked to amplify the Rohingya community's demands for rights and justice. They have also emerged to provide education services, youth services, and other support to community groups and women's groups in the camps.
- o **The activities of RLIs in the Rohingya refugee camps have been greatly impacted by increased government restrictions and security issues.** Due to the Bangladesh authorities cracking down on the political mobilisation of RLIs in 2019, and the increased presence and action of criminal and armed groups in the camps, many RLIs have had to pivot away from direct political advocacy and focus more on direct (and often discreet) community services. This has impacted the political participation of RLIs in decision-making processes in Bangladesh.
- o **RLIs continue to work in a context of severe insecurity and deprivation in Bangladesh.** Many RLIs report that they continue to experience insecurity resulting from the restrictions imposed by authorities, risks of violence and lack of access to livelihood opportunities. Those taking on leadership roles work in a high-risk environment that has cost lives and caused 'displacement within displacement'. Like in other contexts, RLIs struggle to access funding to expand their services and effectively remunerate staff. Restrictions on formal registration and banking contribute to this barrier.
- o **RLIs are generally excluded from all existing coordination and decision-making structures relating to their displacement.** RLIs have built relationships and engaged with other actors who work in the camps, including government officials, camp authorities, UN agencies, NGOs, and other types of community leaders and representatives. However, they report that they are engaged in only cursory ways, not always trusted and respected, and do not have any meaningful role in decision-making.
- o **The call for refugee participation in decision-making, coordination mechanisms, and service delivery is urgent.** RLIs need funding to become more effective, but their equal engagement would also have a tremendous impact. There is a need for RLIs to be included in relevant fora and for relationships to be strengthened between RLIs and other stakeholders. Support for the inclusion of camp-based RLIs in the design and delivery of policies and services will also contribute to a sustainable resolution of Rohingya marginalisation in Myanmar.

Introduction



Image: View of Rohingya refugee camp where refugees are preparing their shelters to protect themselves from cyclones and other natural disasters during the monsoon.

The emergence and experiences of refugee-led initiatives (RLIs) in the Rohingya refugee camps of Cox's Bazar are not well documented. Although RLIs have been established in Cox's Bazar to bring attention to community demands and to provide a variety of protection and support services to refugees in the community, too little is known as to how these RLIs engage with their communities and other stakeholders, and what barriers they

experience when undertaking this work. This report seeks to address this gap. The report examines how RLIs have supported their communities and others. It considers their areas of focus, their governance structures, and their engagement with other stakeholders. Beyond this, the report also highlights the ongoing and significant challenges RLIs experience in the performance of their tasks in the camps.

In showcasing these contributions and challenges, this report is substantially informed by fieldwork interviews conducted in March and April 2022 with fourteen different founders or co-founders of RLIs based in the Rohingya refugee camps of Cox's Bazar. These interviews shed new light on the experiences of RLIs in the camps and reveal insights not available on the public record until now. At the time of conducting the interviews, at least 20 RLIs were working in the camps. All of the RLIs interviewed emerged after the arrival of more than 730,000 Rohingya refugees from Myanmar to Bangladesh in 2017, and at a time when camp conditions were more conducive to this form of civil society development.

In 2017, government authorities allowed RLIs to organise protests and rallies, meet with visiting international delegations, and engage with large numbers of camp residents. However, as participants have reported, conditions for RLIs have deteriorated over time. The Bangladesh government has become increasingly wary of refugee self-determination and has imposed a securitisation strategy that has led to increased restrictions on refugee rights. This has included refugees' right to self-organise.¹ RLIs have also been greatly impacted by the limited access to livelihood opportunities and the increased risk of violence due to the presence of criminal and armed groups in the camps. This has undermined the safety of RLIs activities and impacted their work.

Although the participants of this study chose to remain anonymous due to their ongoing security concerns, the RLIs consulted in this study were among the camps' most prominent and active groups. Four women participants were founders of RLIs that focused on serving the needs of girls and women in the camps. Seven participants were leaders of RLIs focused on serving children and young people. Other participants were directly engaged in RLIs working on educational and other activities. Each of these participants was interviewed by two members of the research team (including one Rohingya researcher), with translation provided where necessary. Additional steps were also taken to minimise the risks to participants during the research process, such as by discussing risks and mitigation steps ahead of time and ensuring safe spaces for virtual communication.² The research project also benefited from existing relationships of trust between members of the research team and refugee leaders in the camps, which had been built through previous projects.³

1

The diversity of refugee-led initiatives (RLIs) in Cox's Bazar

While RLIs in the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar largely emerged after 2017 to collectively advocate on human rights-based issues, over time they have diversified the ways in which they seek to serve their communities. Among the RLIs identified, several have evolved to provide emergency support services to refugees in the camps, especially in areas of need that have not been addressed by other humanitarian actors. For example, one respondent indicated that the RLI they worked with sought to offer immediate support during natural disasters and fires. They noted that camp residents often needed help after sundown, when humanitarians are not present in the camps, and that RLIs helped to service this gap in protection.

Other RLIs, by contrast, focused more on meeting long term community needs. For example, one group indicated that they focused on providing dispute resolution and mediation support to community residents, noting the arguments within families and between neighbours that often arise amid the crowded and challenging quarters. He indicated that his group's 70 members saw themselves as grassroots social workers equipped with tools and wisdom to help community members resolve conflicts. Although the members mostly carried out the group's mission independently as issues arose, they gathered occasionally to discuss common challenges and mediation strategies. Another RLI indicated, for example, that they focused on seeking to mitigate human and sex trafficking and advocated against the dowry system. There were also two major refugee-led education networks, which were established to meet the educational needs of students in the camps.

In addition to these issue-specific initiatives, several RLIs have also been established to meet the needs of diverse subgroups in the Rohingya refugee camps. Five groups, for example, have been established to focus specifically on services to Rohingya children and youth, such as peer-to-peer trainings and other community service activities. Additionally, four RLIs have emerged to focus on meeting the unmet needs of women in the refugee camps. According to patriarchal norms in Rohingya society, men and women rarely interact outside of the home, so only the RLIs working on women's issues have engaged closely with fellow refugee women. The other RLIs in the camps are comprised of, and engage overwhelmingly with, refugee men, but respondents did not explicitly describe their groups as 'men's RLIs', reflecting men's dominance in civil society and public affairs. In relation to education provision, some RLIs run gender-mixed classrooms at the primary level, though girls are excluded from these settings when they reach puberty.

Youth groups

The RLIs focused on servicing the needs of youth have provided a variety of activities, such as peer-to-peer trainings, sports events, blood drives, mental health support, entertainment programs, and emergency responses. Some RLIs have also organised poetry and song writing activities and competitions to promote awareness about social issues. The trainings given by youth RLIs cover content such as human rights, advocacy, negotiation, child marriage, trafficking, leadership skills, communication, and gender awareness.

In general, leaders of youth RLIs suggested that they are more technologically literate than most camp residents, and many are proficient English speakers. One method that they utilise is to take online courses to gain knowledge, and then turn around and disseminate that knowledge to other camp-based youth in person. Many are connected to, and communicate with, international stakeholders, such as human rights groups and diplomats. Some also have contacts within international justice mechanisms. Youth RLI respondents often described themselves as more progressive than other camp residents. For example, one respondent commented:

“ We tried to convince parents to teach their girls. We talked to parents about educational empowerment for girls. But they often don't like to hear it.

ANONYMOUS

Respondents strived to get the blessings of deeply conservative elders and religious leaders with little exposure to non-religious education and other worldviews. They described a diligent approach to gradual trust-building, patiently explaining the importance of their activities, and launching activities with the approval of traditional community stakeholders. One respondent reflected on these challenges and thought that external support from NGOs could help the RLIs engage with others:

“ We face some challenges when we go to engage with some religious people. They don't think the way we think, so sometimes we face challenges. They think that what we are doing is not going to help achieve repatriation. When we said that our work is necessary — to engage, to have more understanding, to be literate — they do not understand it. The religious people are only focused on religious themes ... If NGOs focused more on engaging religious leaders this could change.

ANONYMOUS

Women's groups

The four women's groups identified provided home-based primary education and literacy for girls, livelihood skills trainings, and awareness-raising around women's empowerment and inclusion in decision-making. Some also have addressed domestic violence and trafficking by raising awareness and responding to specific cases. The leaders of women's RLIs sometimes face challenges similar to those faced by the youth RLIs when confronted by the community's conservative views on women's place in society. One woman leader said her goals were:

“

To empower my community's women and girls, fight for our rights, give basic education to women, and express Rohingya people's feelings to the international community.

ANONYMOUS



Over 95 percent of women living in the camps are illiterate. Women's RLI leaders stand out as educated, vocal and socially engaged. They are subject to criticism from community members with conservative mindsets about gender roles. Opposition from extremists in the community has presented many risks, and three of the four women leaders interviewed were living in hiding outside of the camp due to receiving threats of violence. All three said they were still guiding their members and remotely coordinating their RLIs' activities, but they will be missed by other women in the camp and their absence has left a significant leadership vacuum. They said that many other women who participate in RLIs are still living in the camp and receive ongoing threats. They complained of insufficient support and protection from NGOs as they contend with these risks.

Community-based education networks

Hundreds of Rohingya teachers work in an individual capacity or as part of community-led education networks, reaching a multitude of students who otherwise lack access to formal education. Respondents from these groups worked as NGO volunteers in other sectors during the week to earn income but chose to teach outside of the humanitarian education sector because they wanted to use the formal Myanmar government curriculum, which NGOs only started using at a large scale in camp schools in 2022. Since late 2022 improvements have been made to camp formal education systems, but more is needed.⁴

Refugees value the Myanmar curriculum because it represents a tether to their home country, and government schools there were one of few settings where a Rohingya child might interact with a teacher or student from another ethnic background. Previous research suggested that the humanitarian education sector did not investigate these preferences prior to embarking on a multi-year process of designing a new curriculum, one that would not be recognised by Myanmar once Rohingya children repatriated and needed to enrol in government schools.⁵ Community teachers tried to address this gap by forming RLIs that opened community-based schools. The community teachers said they led classes in the early morning and evening, usually without any pay. They strived to reach as many students as possible. For example, one RLI was a network of 10 community-based schools with a total of 70 teachers and 1,800 students.

Despite their impact, in December 2021, camp authorities issued a directive announcing that refugees were no longer allowed to run community-based educational activities.⁶ This had a tremendous impact on the education-focused RLIs. One respondent said that 17 of his group's 20 learning centres were shut down. Teachers from these RLIs explained that community-based education is a matter of dignity and duty: *'We are responsible for our own children'*. RLI members were upset that humanitarian agencies failed to speak out against the decision. In fact, the UNICEF education sector coordinator was included as a signatory on the directive circulated by the office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC), which stated that the decision to close the schools was made during a meeting between the government and UNICEF. This understandably reduced trust and damaged relationships.



We are responsible for our own children.

TEACHERS
From closed education RLIs




Image: A refugee man rebuilds his shelter with bamboo, tarpaulin, and ropes, after it was damaged by a catastrophic fire.

2

RLI governance

RLIs are not formally registered with the Bangladesh government due to policies preventing this. This means RLIs in the Rohingya refugee camps operate informally. Participants in this research project indicated that most RLIs are governed by a central committee, usually consisting of five to 20 members and co-founders. They also have a general membership roster ranging from a dozen to several hundred camp residents who voluntarily participate in and lead the initiative's activities.

In terms of documentation, a common approach was for several founding members to agree on the group's vision and plans verbally during initial meetings. Some RLIs drafted documents outlining the group's vision, mission, and organisational structure, and some had written a code of conduct or other rules for members. Some respondents said that their groups took a democratic approach and used a consensus-based decision-making model, which was important for fostering a sense of unity amongst members. Others had a more hierarchical structure, but none had strict management protocols.

In relation to governance oversight, no groups had a management or monitoring structure to oversee the activities of members, who often implemented activities far from each other in different parts of the camps. Instead, members were trusted to undertake their own activities to fulfil the group's mission. For example, members of youth RLIs often led classes for children from their shelters. Their activities are not monitored by group leaders, and there is no reporting system in place to ensure that commitments are upheld. Rather, there is general acknowledgment that all members are doing their best to serve the community but must prioritise caring for their families and the pursuit of their own livelihoods.

Camp RLIs are loosely governed due to a lack of resources, paid staff, human resource limitations, and the restrictive environment of the camps. Restrictions can be seen to parallel challenges the Rohingya faced in Myanmar, where they were prohibited from developing a civil society and forming organisations. One group leader said that its members were strictly prohibited from direct involvement in political activities and



Image: A refugee man rebuilds his shelter with bamboo, tarpaulin, and ropes, after it was damaged by a catastrophic fire.

required to work for social welfare only. Most groups conduct meetings in person, but restrictive policies that make it difficult to move from one area of the camps to another make this more difficult. The recent experience of COVID-19 lockdowns made gathering and movement particularly difficult.

Culturally, the legacy of disenfranchisement faced by Rohingya for decades meant that few people arrived in Bangladesh with organisational leadership experience. One respondent commented that he only learned about the concept of a civil society after arriving in Bangladesh. Similarly, the leader of a women's group — one of a small handful of university-educated refugee women — described her challenges in mobilising enough women to form a central committee for her organisation. Initially, her organisational development strategy was to build up a core committee before growing the group's broader membership. Her work had led to the proliferation of other women's groups as the committee members she trained went on to form their own RLI:



We initially chose 20 central committee members ... At first it was very difficult for us because the 20 women we organised did not even understand the instructions we gave them. They could not catch our points. So, at the beginning, to organise the women, to make them understand what we wanted to do was a challenge. They couldn't understand our words and activities; why we want to empower our women.

So, I had to train the main 20 members for the first few months. Then they started mobilising other women in their respective camps, visiting door to door, and talking about how women are also humans and have rights. We explained human rights issues and did a lot of educational activities. The women were surprised to hear that they had rights, as Myanmar always oppressed the whole community and the women just stayed inside the home.

ANONYMOUS

The leader of a women's group

3

RLI engagement with other stakeholders

In Bangladesh, the challenging operating environment has greatly impacted how RLIs in the camps have engaged with other stakeholders. As a prior Act for Peace report has documented, this operating environment is characterised by:

a limited domestic and regional legal and policy framework, a weak and deteriorating refugee protection environment, complex and inadequate humanitarian coordination structures, restricted opportunities for inclusion of refugees or host communities in decision-making and coordination structures ... contested localisation agendas[, and] the deteriorating situation and dim prospects of peace and justice for Rohingya in Myanmar ... with the international and regional community seeking to contain the problem in Bangladesh, and await resolution in Myanmar, rather than take shared responsibility or offer any particular joint solution.⁷

These dynamics have often resulted in division, suspicion, and a lack of trust between RLIs and other stakeholders. It has also often led to RLIs working in isolation from other humanitarian counterparts.

During fieldwork interviews for this project, respondents described mixed experiences with various external stakeholders, including camp authorities, humanitarian NGOs, UN agencies, foreign governments, diplomatic delegations, human rights groups, the Rohingya diaspora, and Myanmar civil society. Some mentioned by name certain humanitarian staff who they said engaged them respectfully as stakeholders and strived to amplify their needs and priorities. These individuals' presence were missed after their missions ended, and their ability to foster positive relations demonstrates the importance of a 'human face' for large and complex agencies.

At the same time, respondents felt that humanitarian stakeholders in Cox's Bazar had sometimes been tokenistic in their engagement of camp civil society or had ignored RLIs altogether. As one respondent indicated:

“

We don't like organisations that don't involve refugees in decision-making. They just listen. They don't care about us.

ANONYMOUS

Additionally, respondents expressed concern that they were often unaware whether their inputs had influenced external planning, and they were unanimous in their call for meaningful inclusion in service delivery, humanitarian coordination, and decision-making. While RLI members see themselves as leaders who should be entrusted to represent the broader community's interests, particularly with regard to the issues that their RLIs seek to address, they did not believe this perspective was shared (or at least enabled) by others.

According to the information provided by respondents in 2022, no refugee leader has ever been present at any humanitarian sector coordination meeting. Further, no refugee leader has participated in the meetings that take place between agencies, which usually occur in the city of Cox's Bazar, over an hour's drive from the camps. In contrast, some respondents maintained frequent online communication with overseas stakeholders working on Rohingya issues remotely, often on the rights and justice-related aspects of the crisis. The below chart is reproduced here from an earlier policy brief by Act for Peace, but it highlights the exclusion of the Rohingya from all national level and Cox's Bazar level coordination infrastructure.⁸

Levels/Actors in Rohingya Coordination Infrastructure			
	National Level	Cox's Bazar Level	Camp Level
Gov't	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National Committee (under MoHA) - National Task Force - Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR) - NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) - District/Sub-district Admin. - Police - Army 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Camp in Charge (CiC) (ACiCs) - Armed Police Battalion - Bangladeshi Army
UN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic Executive Group (SEG) - Localisation Task Force (LTF) - Protection Advocacy Working Group (PAWG) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) - Heads of Sub-Office Group (HoSoG) - Sectors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Site Management and Site Development Sectors (SMSD) - ISCG/Sectors
Donors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Members of SEG (including LTF and PAWG) - Bilateral engagement with govt authorities, UN and NGOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Members of HoSoG, participate in Sector Coordination Meetings - Bilateral engagement with RRRC, district authorities, UN, and NGOs 	----
NGOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formal and informal INGO/Bangladesh NGO networks - Disaster Preparedness (NAHAB; NIRAPAD; BDPC; ADAB; FNB) - Rohingya response (The INGO Forum and INGO ESC; CSO Alliance) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> NGO Networks: - Bangladesh Rohingya Response NGO Platform (NGO Platform) - Cox's Bazar CSO-NGO Forum (CCNF) - Sector leads/members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Camp level sector focal points - Service delivery
Refugees	---	---	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Majhis camp and block level committees in some camps - Para Development Committees (refugees and host communities) - other informal community-based networks - Religious leaders

Engagement with camp leaders

One of the challenges that RLIs discussed related to their engagement with camp leaders. In many other camp contexts around the globe, camp governance systems involve elected refugees. In Bangladesh, however, government authorities work with ‘majhis’. Majhis are refugee men appointed by the authorities as block captains to coordinate aid distribution activities across roughly 100 households. In the Rohingya refugee camps, majhis began playing a de facto leadership role despite not undergoing any leadership training, and they have been accused of corruption.⁹

Majhis are bound to abide by authorities’ instructions and are not usually recognised as traditional leaders by others in the community. However, not knowing where else to turn, refugees have often gone to majhis for help with dispute resolution, domestic violence, and other types of support. Respondents described majhis as focused only on liaising with authorities while being unaware or unsupportive of RLIs. They are in a position of power because they are the refugees’ main channel of access to their Camps in Charge (CiC) and other authorities.

RLIs would like to engage with CiCs to address serious concerns, but are generally unable to do so because they are required to communicate with authorities via their block’s majhi rather than directly. Respondents suspected that majhis may also be opposed to their direct engagement, perhaps out of fear that RLIs will report issues of majhi corruption to CiCs.

Even where access is possible, there are other challenges. One youth RLI leader described wanting to work more closely with his CiC to stop child marriage, and saw his group as well positioned to help solve problems that CiCs face:

“

A few months ago, the CiC called me to his office. He said that the rate of child marriage was high and that, if possible, as an educated youth I should help stop it. I said sure, 20 of our members live in his camp and could engage with religious leaders in each block. He said that was not possible, so I asked him how else we could help stop child marriage without doing any activities. He said to just tell one person to tell one person, etc ... We would really like to work with youth on this issue, but the CiC doesn’t allow us.

ANONYMOUS
A youth RLI leader

Elected camp/block committees should be considered in every camp, replacing the majhi system, such that committees that are represented by elected refugee representatives, including women, are identified through a transparent and consultative process.¹⁰

Engagement with UN agencies

In the Rohingya refugee camps, there have been ongoing issues of distrust between RLIs and UN agencies, which have impacted effective partnerships. Refugees have also shown scepticism regarding the UN's ability to ensure their protection. Even before the most recent exodus, a 2017 inquiry commissioned by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in Rakhine State urged the humanitarian community to 'dramatically shift away from its quiet and compliant approach to advocacy' on the Rohingya issue.¹¹ These criticisms have been repeated in Bangladesh, where the UN has sometimes been described as overly deferential to authorities.

Most of the RLIs interviewed for this research indicated that they had engaged with UN agencies in the camps, such as by joining meetings when invited, and approaching staff for protection and other forms of support. Some groups had helped distribute women's hygiene kits, teaching supplies, and other aid items that had been provided by UN agencies. However, they also felt that UN agencies rarely considered RLI views when making decisions, and efforts to build relationships had been minimal.

UNHCR's community-based protection team, for example, has maintained a WhatsApp group for RLI leaders to share information about community affairs. UNHCR also convened a monthly meeting with RLIs (until the pandemic). At the same time, RLIs shared screenshots of the WhatsApp group as evidence of the agency's unresponsiveness. They mentioned times when they reached out to a camp protection focal point after receiving death threats and did not receive assistance despite their unique security needs as human rights defenders.

Participants in this study also noted the damage caused by the unresponsiveness and failures of protection in relation to the assassination of Mohibullah, who was the founder and leader of the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights (ARSPH), the most influential RLI in the camps. They indicated that Mohibullah had appealed to UNHCR among other stakeholders noting death threats and asking for protection from extremists. However, these requests went unheeded, and he was tragically assassinated.¹² One respondent described the impact of the assassination on the community:

Since Mohibullah's death, other refugee leaders in the camps have appealed to UNHCR for protection and some have been able to secure it.¹³ However, respondents noted that it should not have required this tragic event to provoke change.

“

There is no other leader. After Mohibullah's death we realised what a good leader he was for us ... If we look for another like him, we cannot find anyone. He had good communication with Myanmar, Bangladesh, and the refugee community... So I am really missing his leadership. We lost him. Now I cannot see anyone in the camp who can communicate with Bangladesh, who can raise our issues — no one. Everyone is afraid.

ANONYMOUS

Some high-profile leaks have also caused mistrust. For example, the UNHCR's public position opposing Bangladesh's proposed relocation of Rohingya refugees to Bhasan Char, a remote silt island, was contradicted by a leaked MoU¹⁴ between UNHCR and Bangladesh.¹⁵ Refugees criticised the secrecy of the MoU, in the same way they criticised a previous MoU between UNHCR, Bangladesh and Myanmar on Rohingya repatriation and Bangladesh sharing UNHCR biometric data with Myanmar. These incidents hinder trust. One person said:



We call upon UNHCR to establish a mechanism that appropriately facilitates our inclusion in discussions about our humanitarian and political future. Any MoU that excludes us cannot be valid and will not be implementable.

ANONYMOUS

As noted previously, UNICEF has also been perceived to support, or at least acquiesce in, the camp directive to shut down community-based educational activities, and RLIs expressed frustration that all humanitarian agencies failed to speak out against the decision. The education of the community's children is a fundamental issue and hits at a deeply personal level. From 2019 to 2021, UNICEF engaged with education RLIs in the lead-up to the education sector's roll-out of the Myanmar Curriculum Pilot (MCP). The MCP was developed in response to refugees' demands for their children to be taught the Myanmar government curriculum rather than the non-formal curriculum taught by teachers at learning centres. RLIs were once eager to engage in discussions about the MCP, but relations deteriorated

because of the RRRC announcement banning community schools.¹⁶ Community teachers felt that UNICEF had done little to engage with them about this directive, and that they conceded something in allowing the shutdown of their community schools without consulting them.

This sense of betrayal was expressed by one teacher who also leads an RLI. He complained:

UNICEF designed the MCP with the help of the community and committed to engaging with us on it. But in the end, they broke their promise and left us behind ... Another group leader complained, 'UNICEF did a one-off consultation, but they weren't listening. They were just talking about themselves and their own way.'

In relation to women's issues, respondents noted that UN Women had developed relationships with the most prominent leaders of women's RLIs, and they had convened monthly meetings and engaged several women as volunteers who were paid a stipend to conduct community outreach activities. The RLI leaders who were involved in these activities seemed to feel more meaningfully engaged than those who engaged with other agencies. At the same time, there were points of dissatisfaction. Participants indicated that they were not always fairly compensated for their time or input when they engaged. Furthermore, respondents suggested that sometimes meetings felt extractive and that they received little in return for their work, despite providing a steady flow of essential information and insights that the agency needed. One woman felt that after consistent engagement for two years, 'we are becoming less trustful'. While there are restrictions by the Bangladesh government on work and compensation, compensation for time and work is a rights issue. Acknowledgement of the source of information is always important, as is feeding back to those who contributed so that they can see the impact. These are areas in need of improvement for all stakeholders.



Image: A refugee woman plucks leaves and flowers from pumpkins she grew in front of her shelter to eat with her family.

Interactions with foreign governments and visiting delegations

Another area of engagement for RLIs was in relation to foreign governments and visiting delegations. From 2017 to 2019, RLI representatives noted that they met frequently with visiting delegations from Myanmar, Bangladesh, and other countries, as well as regional blocs like ASEAN. In these meetings, they were able to make their priorities known to delegates, which helped transmit refugee voices to high levels of power and was a way for refugees to bring global awareness to the crisis. However, due to COVID-19 and dwindling media attention amid other crises, international delegations came to the camps less frequently. Respondents also said that authorities increasingly turned to majhis instead of civil society members to meet with delegations and positioned majhis as community leaders:

Now, if there is a foreign visitor or ambassador — when big leaders come, like the UK's visit recently — no community leader is there to greet and meet them. Only majhis go. They are the only ones present who could share the state of the community.

ANONYMOUS

Furthermore, in key decisions like conditions for safe, voluntary, and dignified repatriation, no Rohingya was included in Myanmar and Bangladesh's political negotiations despite the community's demands for representation.

Engagement with human rights investigations and international justice mechanisms

Some RLIs had documented human rights abuses and war crimes to assist investigations conducted by the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission, the International Criminal Court (ICC), and international human rights groups. These stakeholders began to resume visits to Cox's Bazar as COVID-19 restrictions eased in 2022, and investigative teams have engaged periodically with RLI leaders as well as Rohingya diaspora groups.

Engagement with camp RLIs is a pillar of the outreach strategies developed by the ICC's Public Information and Outreach Section and its Victim Reparations and Participation Section. According to the ICC's website, 'The Court works with local intermediaries, particularly civil society groups such as NGOs, who support its activities in the field and strengthen the Court's capacity to engage with communities affected by crimes'.¹⁷ Although respondents were frustrated that international justice mechanisms moved slowly and had limited remit, they nonetheless saw justice actors as working in a spirit of solidarity.

Justice and Accountability for Myanmar's treatment of displaced Rohingya are areas of work that face less restriction from the Government of Bangladesh who see this as necessary work that places responsibility for the crisis squarely on the Myanmar government. By contrast, work relating to protection in Bangladesh faces more resistance from the Bangladesh Government who see further demands on Bangladesh to be unfair given the lack of responsibility-sharing by the international community. Bangladesh also pushes back against de facto integration in Bangladesh, indicating that the solution lies in Myanmar. The government insists on a sharp distinction between accountability work and protection work.

Engagement with the Rohingya diaspora

There is some coordination between RLI members in Bangladesh and counterpart groups in the Rohingya diaspora, an important link that connects camp civil society to the world. A woman respondent described her conversations with diaspora leaders, particularly women, as motivational and encouraging:

“

Diaspora leaders sometimes invite us for Zoom meetings ... I am happy that those who have access to world leaders can raise our voices.

ANONYMOUS

A woman respondent

The majority of RLIs had no regular contact with diaspora representatives. Visits are difficult for diaspora members due to government restrictions on movement but were seen as an important expression of support and solidarity, as was support from diaspora leaders for activities like trainings and community-led education.

A high-level diaspora representative visited the camps for their research and was able to meet with RLI leaders. Despite the fact that this was the first high-profile diaspora visit since the beginning of the pandemic, intelligence agencies and camp authorities accompanied the representative to every one of his meetings, so RLI leaders were unable to speak openly. One respondent described the current dynamic as one needing improved collaboration between diaspora and RLI leaders:

“

There are a range of Rohingya-led human rights and advocacy groups operating around the world from countries Rohingya have resettled in. These organisations are often invited to speak on behalf of the Rohingya at international events and forums ... It is important that on matters related to conditions in Rakhine, repatriation or other migration options for the Rohingya refugees, the actors within the refugee community in Cox's Bazar are included and consulted.

ANONYMOUS

There is much to be gained by ensuring that the diaspora communities and camp-based communities have the means to communicate openly and consult with each other. Such channels of communication need to be open for consistent and regular engagement.

Consultation with other community leaders

Religious leaders, elders, and teachers are influential community members to whom RLI members turn for guidance and approval. A youth leader said:

“

We do monthly consultations with key people from our community and design our services after taking their opinions. We are happy about the support we are getting from our community.

ANONYMOUS

As described above, some respondents carefully navigated relationships and trust-building with conservative gatekeepers to ensure their acceptance of the RLIs' work. They felt that it was essential to build and maintain good relationships with religious leaders, as this would help uphold Rohingya cultural norms while also opening opportunities for engagement between civil society and religious institutions.

Collaboration with Myanmar civil society

Reflective of the legacy of conflict, RLIs had not engaged substantially with Myanmar civil society counterparts. One respondent said that they wanted to build relationships, and that RLIs could be key drivers of reconciliation efforts. They thought that international supporters could help position them as such, such as by hosting platforms or roundtables for relationship-building. Some efforts to engage camp youth have been initiated from the Myanmar side. A private institute that trains Myanmar youth in the social sciences, for example, has reached out to camp youth and encouraged them to apply for admission to an online course alongside their peers from different ethnic groups.

After the February 2021 military coup in Myanmar, youth from camp RLIs used social media to express solidarity with the anti-coup protesters, some of whom responded by posting apologies and support for Rohingya. This wave of outreach spread, according to respondents, because Myanmar people started to recognise the similarities between the Army's brutal attacks against the anti-coup resistance and the 2017 crackdowns on Rohingya. One youth leader explained:

“

We notice that there has been a big shift in the positions of Myanmar protesters and civil society networks about the Rohingya. Now that many people have seen first-hand the same type of violence that the military inflicted on the Rohingya ... We think there is an opportunity to work together on justice and accountability and to create a more inclusive identity for Myanmar in the future.

ANONYMOUS
A youth leader

So far, there has been limited direct engagement as key Myanmar activists focus on the broader democratic movement. But RLI members were hopeful that deeply rooted divisions and mistrust between Rohingya, Rakhine, and other groups can be overcome. One respondent from a youth RLI described his group's efforts to build good will with youth in Myanmar:

“ *We have connections with Myanmar students, and we hold dialogues amongst ourselves to reflect on the hate speech and problems Rohingya faced in Myanmar. Most of the university-age Burmese youth are adapting a positive mindset toward Rohingya. When we can change their minds, we see that as our success.*

... When Myanmar people try to get us to participate in their campaigns, we do, even though it is risky. Myanmar is our country and right now there is no sustainable solution. We are all in an unstable situation ...

ANONYMOUS

A respondent from a youth RLI


A photograph showing three men in a dimly lit setting, likely a workshop or a small hut, engaged in the traditional craft of making fishing nets. The man on the left is an older man with a long, white beard and hair, wearing a blue and white checkered shirt. He is focused on his work. The man in the middle is younger, with dark hair, wearing a patterned shirt and blue pants, also working on a net. The man on the right is partially visible, wearing a blue and white striped shirt. They are surrounded by large, green fishing nets that are draped over the structure. The background shows a stack of firewood, suggesting a rural or semi-rural environment. The lighting is warm and focused on the men and their work.

Image: Three refugee men make fishing nets.



Image: Three refugee men make fishing nets.

Myanmar's civilian National Unity Government (NUG) formed in April 2021 in opposition to the new junta, and its representatives echoed the expressions of solidarity with Rohingya that had already emerged on the streets. Rohingya and the international community appreciated the NUG's tone but called for the appointment of a Rohingya representative to prove that its positive statements were genuine and not mere attempts to garner international support.¹¹ The NUG eventually appointed a Rohingya civil society leader from Myanmar as an advisor, but to date has not appointed a Rohingya representative. The gap between rhetoric and tangible progress fuelled scepticism among respondents, who pointed out that officials from the National League for Democracy, which held power during the 2017 exodus of Rohingya, are now in senior positions with the NUG. Still, they unanimously saw the NUG as their best hope:

“

We do not see our return to Myanmar as being possible under the current junta. We do however see it as possible under the NUG or a similarly representative body.

ANONYMOUS

4

Barriers to RLIs in Cox's Bazar

Although RLIs provide a wide range of protection and advocacy services to those in the Rohingya refugee camps, their activities have been greatly impacted over the years by increased government restrictions and security issues. This impact has been particularly pronounced from 2019 onwards, when the Bangladesh authorities began cracking down more heavily on the political mobilisation of RLIs following a peaceful demonstration of an estimated 200,000 refugees in the camps. This demonstration was organised by the Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights and marked the two-year anniversary of their displacement on 25 August 2019 (known to Rohingya as Genocide Day).¹⁸

While the 2019 Bangladesh government crackdown did not force all RLIs to disband entirely, many have had to find more discreet ways to continue serving the community. Some groups, such as an RLI that was formed to mobilise youth to advocate for rights and justice, have shifted away from their focus on advocacy to more neutral, non-political activities. Examples include teaching primary level classes from their shelters, leading small trainings for youth on topics such as human rights and gender studies, providing first response to fires and floods, and establishing blood donation programs. Leaders of these groups have indicated that this shift was partly a response to pressure from authorities and partly due to threats from ARSA. Notably, even when projects have taken on a non-political nature, group leaders have often tried to minimise visibility of the projects as a precautionary measure. This has been both because of a general climate of fear, and because they have been uncertain whether they had permission to conduct activities.

At the time of writing, the political dynamics surrounding refugee participation and leadership remain in flux, as policy decisions about refugee governance tend to be made in an ad hoc fashion. After three years of tight restrictions, signs emerged in 2022 that Bangladesh was re-evaluating its clampdown on civil society's political voice. This could perhaps be attributed to Bangladesh's recognition that the refugees are their strongest ally, with many sharing the view that repatriation to Myanmar is the ultimate solution to the crisis. Camp authorities, for example, encouraged refugees to participate in a demonstration for a "Go Home" campaign that took place on 19 June 2022, and seem to have led the planning process, even designing and printing the banners and other materials.¹⁹ Several respondents said they were confused about the authorities' role in and rationale for planning the rally, but participated willingly and hoped that the organising space would continue to expand. A recent go-and-see visit by 20 Rohingya refugees and 7 Bangladeshi officials was another example

of refugee engagement, even if the focus on 'return' in such engagement remains predominant.²⁰ Further, some RLIs that previously worked on political and rights-related issues have begun once again to bolster their advocacy and voice the demands of refugees. This has included social media communications, joint statements about human rights issues and other forms of advocacy, although risks remain high.

Lastly, an ongoing barrier for many RLIs is the lack of access to livelihood opportunities. Due to policies that prevent refugees in Bangladesh from formal employment, none of the RLIs in the Rohingya camps have paid staff, none of the RLIs in the Rohingya camps have paid staff, are registered, and have bank accounts. Accordingly, they struggle to achieve goals and support the community given the restrictions and their lack of resources, and activities tend to be sporadic. When funding is needed, many RLIs fund their own activities through donations from members. Only a few have ever received a donation from an outside funder, such as a supporter from the Rohingya diaspora.

Some RLIs stated in fieldwork interviews that they would like external support but indicated that they lack connections to donors. Other RLIs noted that they have a policy not to accept outside funds. For example, the co-founder of one RLI supporting refugee youth in the camps explained how his group operates by collecting monthly dues from its 300 members. The group prizes its self-sufficiency and the autonomy it grants:

“

We each give 100 taka per month that we use for the activities we do in camp, like blood donation drives and our anti-violence campaign. So, our budget is 30,000 monthly. We have no donors from outside and we do not communicate with any donors, even though we have received many offers of funding from donors who have learned about our activities. We do not want their money because we would have to stay under their rules, and our unity would be destroyed.

ANONYMOUS
Co-founder of an RLI

Other RLIs were unable to collect membership dues, a source of frustration for members who wish they had more resources but are constrained by poverty and a lack of access to livelihoods:

“

Sometimes we don't even have enough money to manage our family expenses ... But we have to hold meetings with members of our organisation and community. We just need a little money to run those meetings, not too much. But we don't have it. This is our main problem.

ANONYMOUS

5

External support needs and requests

RLIs wish they could register and receive funding, and strong advocacy is needed to support calls for compensating time and work as a rights issue. Some suggested that donors must find ways to fund them and overcome banking restrictions they may face in Bangladesh.

Respondents also described other ways in which external support would help them serve the community. These included facilitation of communication platforms, support for engagement with diaspora and other Myanmar groups:

“

As we are Myanmar nationals, we should have communication with other leaders in Myanmar ... I suggest that if anyone can help us contact them and build trust, we can develop good communication with Myanmar people.

ANONYMOUS

At the international level, one respondent argued that allies of Rohingya should help bolster them to work toward solutions and more effective responsibility-sharing:

“

In the camps, most RLIs are working for the community to promote peace, justice, education, political participation and rights, which will make our lives better in Bangladesh in the camps and in Myanmar in the future. Powerful countries should coordinate to put pressure on Myanmar. We have to make a strong team ... The international community also must emphasise the need to secure the freedom of the remaining Rohingya in northern Rakhine State ... We are requesting the international community to work together and consult with Rohingya representatives to address these issues.

ANONYMOUS

Respondents also requested opportunities for online training developed to suit the needs of RLI members and other camp youth. Training topics requested included skills-oriented trainings on leadership skills, communication, management, teaching, and classroom management. Thematic trainings were requested on human rights, non-violent movement-building, community development, gender equality, gender-based violence, media literacy, and political science. One respondent added that RLIs need external support to get permission from camp authorities to work openly, and should be allowed to provide books, electronic resources, and other learning tools to members of the community.

Conclusion

Although RLIs have emerged in the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar to raise awareness on the needs of the community and to provide a range of support services, not enough is known as to how these RLIs engage with their communities and others, and what barriers they face when undertaking this work. This report has shown that the large-scale displacement of Rohingya to Bangladesh in 2017 led to the formation of more than 20 RLIs in the Rohingya refugee camps. These new RLIs have worked to strengthen the Rohingya community's advocacy for rights-based protection and justice. They have also sought to fill gaps in humanitarian protection by offering education services, youth services, services for Rohingya women, and other forms of community support. These services have been severely impacted by government restrictions and security issues, along with a lack of livelihood opportunities. However, they remain significant to Rohingya in the camps and need to be more effectively supported and integrated into protection responses.

Going forward, participants in this study have indicated that the need for refugee participation in decision-making, coordination mechanisms, and service delivery is vital. RLIs need funding and programmatic support to become more effective, but their equal engagement in the design and delivery of protection responses would also have a tremendous impact. RLIs have indicated that currently they are engaged in only cursory ways. They do not feel that they are trusted and respected, and do not believe that they have any meaningful role in decision-making. Support for the inclusion of camp-based RLIs in the design and delivery of policies and services will not only allow Rohingya to have greater self-sufficiency in the camps, but it will also contribute to a sustainable resolution of Rohingya marginalisation in Myanmar.

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