

Livelihoods In Rohingya Camps

Skill-to-work transitions will lessen the burden on Bangladesh, discussants say at 2nd 'Community of Practice' session in BRAC

Against the backdrop of the Government of Bangladesh endorsing the 'Framework on Skills Development for Rohingya Refugees and Host Communities', some Rohingyas are undergoing diverse training to maintain

productivity until their safe and dignified repatriation to Myanmar. However, the question remains: given the restrictions on mobility and the right to work, what kinds of livelihood solutions are feasible in the Rohingya

camps? Are the products they are producing in high demand, or is the process merely keeping them occupied to prevent idle minds from causing unrest?



Panelists addressing the 2nd Community of Practice session on "Livelihoods in Rohingya Camps." From left: Abu Morshed Chowdhury, chief executive, PHALS, Subrata Kumar Chakrabarty, livelihood and economic inclusion officer, UNHCR, KAM Morshed, senior director, BRAC, Dr Salma Akhter, professor of Sociology, University of Dhaka, and Dr Md Akramul Islam, senior director, BRAC.

Investments are crucial to ensure that Rohingyas produce items that are consumed both inside and outside the camps. However, what should be the immediate steps, and what knowledge gaps exist among respondents such as the United Nations, researchers, policymakers, INGOs, and NGOs?

Above all, whatever actions are taken, they must not stop the Rohingyas from returning to their home country Myanmar, which is where the displacement problem originated. The objective is to assist Bangladesh, and Rohingya refugees in better coping with this manmade disaster, especially as funds are dwindling due to events

such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia-Ukraine war.

These remarks circulated during a workshop titled "Community of Practice (CoP): Livelihoods in Rohingya Camps" which took place at the BRAC Centre on 24 May 2023. This workshop served as the second session of the

Investments are crucial to ensure that Rohingyas produce items that are consumed both inside and outside the camps. However, what should be the immediate steps, and what knowledge gaps exist among respondents such as the United Nations, researchers, policymakers, INGOs, and NGOs?

Community of Practice (CoP), a platform designed for researchers, development practitioners, and relevant agencies to share research-based knowledge and experiential learning regarding Rohingya responses. BRAC is facilitating these sessions in partnership with UNHCR. Presentations on livelihood activities and survivability of Rohingyas and market assessment of livelihood opportunities in Bhasan char were delivered by researchers and academicians.



In the introductory speech, Soo Jin Rhee, UNHCR Deputy Country Representative in Bangladesh, said, "At this juncture of the crisis, this discussion is more pertinent than ever. The research findings will lay the

foundation for what we are going to look into the Rohingya response. With diminishing humanitarian funding, Rohingya refugees need to be allowed to increasingly engage in livelihood opportunities to become more resilient and less dependent on humanitarian aid while they wait for voluntary repatriation to Myanmar. An investment in education, skills and livelihoods would give a sense of purpose and hope, contribute to their safety and well-being, and build their capacity for return to Myanmar."



Tasfia Islam Tiba, Senior Technical Officer at the International Rescue Committee, shed light on how Rohingyas are making a living in Ukhiya by running small shops, mobile money transactions etc. But the scope of agricultural activities is limited due to the lack of space in the camps, she pointed out in her presentation titled "Livelihood activities in the Rohingya camps: A sociological study in Cox's Bazar."



Dr Khadija Mitu, Senior Qualitative Researcher at GAGE, pointed out that male Rohingyas aged 19-21 years were disengaging from educational opportunities as they were eager to seize income-generating opportunities.

They were not willing to go through the skill-to-work transitions. Dr Mitu made the claim by citing qualitative and quantitative surveys done both in refugee settings and host communities between April 2019 and March 2023.

She pointed out that 46% of male respondents aged 15-17 years were the sole breadwinners in their families. Older boys were employed mostly in non-agricultural, unskilled manual labour while girls were in sewing or volunteering.



Dr M Ala Uddin, Professor of Anthropology, Chittagong University explored the current source of income of Rohingyas

(humanitarian aid, remittance, labour, debt, illegal engagement), what they did back in Myanmar (agriculture, fishery, small trade, cattle rearing, household works), and what they can do in Cox's Bazar camps (handcrafts, produce bags, mask etc. etc. repair electronics, day labour, fishing, and horticulture).

He said that employment for Rohingyas was not just about income generation. But broadly about reaching stability in life through skill development, social networks and support, and access to education and legal protection. He stressed vocational training and the promotion of entrepreneurship.

Male Rohingyas aged 19-21 years were disengaging from educational opportunities as they were eager to seize income-generating opportunities.



In his presentation, Prof Dr SM Fakhru Islam, Team Leader at IRG Development Services Limited, detailed existing knowledge and skills and potential livelihood opportunities (both Agri and non-Agri) in climate-smart agricultural production, agriculture-based small

scale enterprise, and off-farm activities for the Rohingyas in Bhasan Char.

Citing data he showed that the majority of his respondents were interested in crop farming but lacked skills and knowledge in crop production technologies. They also needed training on market linkage.



"If you visit the camps in the evening you will see thousands of informal shops being run there. Children born here think that it is their country. But we need to remind them that it is not and repatriation is the ultimate goal. Because feeding on donations is not a dignified life", said Md Shamsud Douza, additional Refugee Relief And Repatriation Commissioner, Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, Government of Bangladesh.

During the panel discussion, he said: "Jute production, construction of toilets, production of hosiery, sanitary napkins, tailoring are some of the livelihood options currently available in Cox's Bazar camps. In Bhasan Char, the options are more in relation to agriculture like homestead gardening, as land is available there. And it is an open secret that

these camps are a hub of drug trading. So there are livelihood opportunities whether it's legal, illegal, formal or informal,"



Panel moderator KAM Morshed said, This discussion is not about whether livelihood will keep them in Bangladesh or entice them to not go. Bangladesh is already at the receiving end of many of the challenges due to the influx. If there is hunger and more illegal activities inside the camp, the social economic cost on Bangladesh will only go up. If we cannot do without allowing livelihood, then the question is what is the win-win strategy for both the Rohingya refugees and people of Cox's Bazar.



Another panellist Abu Morshed Chowdhury, chief executive, PHALS, said: "We have to think about the local economy but also keep in mind that the host community is demographically

imbalanced right now. We can minimise the threats by introducing social cohesion as a cross-cutting issue in every intervention. There are 15 mega shops being run by WFP in the camps. We need to do the analysis to find out how much these shops are in demand and how we can involve Rohingyas in the supply chain etc.”



Subrata Kumar Chakrabarty flagged some of the challenges faced by UNHCR in terms of arranging vocational training for Rohingyas following the skills framework. “Their education level is low. We have to develop the curriculum based on the ASEAN framework. But who will provide the certificate? Then comes the utilisation of the skills; they can work as volunteers or be interns in different sectors. We are negotiating with organisations in this regard.”



Professor Salmar Akter suggested that there should be a policy and strategy to link more women to the market and supply chain. Women in camps were interested in working and getting non-traditional training but had been deprived of social capital due to many social-cultural barriers. So intervention was needed to revise gender roles within households as well.



Prof Dr Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir emphasised working to ensure that the skills acquired by the Rohingyas be transformed into a flow of labour and earnings so that a virtuous cycle is on. He said that the response plan must develop within three boundaries: one, the rules set by the government; two, keeping the fact in mind that this

crisis stemmed from overseas and the solution lies there; and lastly, there is hopelessness among these people which might result in something undesirable. “Our policy should be learning by doing where our solution may not be the best one but can be the second best or the optimal one,” he opined.

“ This discussion is not about whether livelihood will keep them in Bangladesh or entice them to not go. Bangladesh is already at the receiving end of many of the challenges due to the influx. If there is hunger and more illegal activities inside the camp, the social economic cost on Bangladesh will only go up.

In conclusion, BRAC Senior Director KAM Morshed argued that the government is saying that if more opportunity is given or their stay is made comfortable, then the Rohingyas will stay back. But there is no empirical evidence. “We did not stay back in India in 1971. We do not know how much the Rohingyas will earn, or what exactly will be the training. These all are hunches. We should be allowed to try out one thing after another. In other words, build the aircraft while flying.”

BRAC

BRAC Centre
75 Mohakhali
Dhaka 1212
Bangladesh

T: +88 02 2222 81265
F: +88 02 2222 63542
E: info@brac.net
W: www.brac.net

Follow us:



/BRACworld