



ROHINGYA YEARBOOK 2020

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BRAC's humanitarian crisis management programme (HCMP) faced unprecedented challenges in Cox's Bazar in 2020, ranging from the COVID-19 pandemic and extreme weather events to funding constraints and simmering conflict between communities. The following chapters tell the story of the BRAC teams and programme participants who remained resolute in the face of adversity, adapting, innovating, and strengthening cooperation with partners to continue critical support to Rohingya and host Bangladeshi communities.

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Foreword



The influx of almost one million Rohingya, forcibly displaced from Myanmar, into Bangladesh in 2017 created a humanitarian emergency. BRAC has worked with the Rohingya and the local community surrounding the camps to provide comprehensive support since then.

BRAC's work in Cox's Bazar predates the influx by almost four decades. BRAC has a

longstanding presence in Cox's Bazar, particularly in the areas of disaster response, education and water, hygiene and sanitation. BRAC's humanitarian crisis management programme has been the largest non-governmental responder on the ground since the influx. As the crisis has evolved, and the needs of the communities have changed, we have continuously learnt, adapted, innovated, and integrated development approaches into humanitarian programming.

COVID-19 exacerbated the myriad challenges facing the camps and local communities. Many feared a catastrophe when the fast-spreading virus reached the densely-packed camps in March 2020.

Pandemic-related restrictions also threatened to roll back hard-won gains in areas such as health, sanitation and hygiene, livelihoods, education and protection. What is not told enough though, is how the pandemic also presented opportunities to respond in newways.

This yearbook tells the stories of the BRAC teams that remained on the frontlines in Cox's Bazar, the people who worked with our partners to provide critical support to the Rohingya and host communities, and what we learnt.

I thank our frontline staff members and volunteers for having persevered through the uncertainties of the year 2020, where multiple crises overlapped the pandemic, a super cyclone and the longest floods in three decades.

My gratitude also goes out to our partners, with whom we were able to work together to find creative approaches to tackle a constantly evolving situation. The *Pashe Achhi* (Beside You) tele-education model, one-stop integrated healthcare service, community water networks, two-storey classrooms, and group gardening initiatives are few of the examples of such innovation.

From healthcare and emergency services, to protection and skills development, this yearbook reflects how empathy and a sense of shared responsibility can continue to inspire hope and resilience in the face of adversity. As we move forward from the pandemic, my hope is that this yearbook can be a guide to partnering and learning to adapt in the inevitably uncertain times ahead of us, due to increased global conflict, climate change and rising global inequality.

Asif Saleh
Executive Director
BRAC

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2020: MEETING CHALLENGES HEAD-ON

2020: Meeting challenges head-on

2020 was unprecedented for BRAC's humanitarian crisis management programme (HCMP). On top of the COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladesh endured extreme weather events, depletion of natural resources, funding constraints and the simmering conflict between communities. These factors combined to exacerbate a massive humanitarian crisis in Cox's Bazar.



A BRAC health worker advises people of various ages



Rohingya adolescents with Asif Saleh, Executive Director, BRAC

Against this backdrop, BRAC redoubled its efforts to provide healthcare, clean water, sanitation, food, clothing, education, and social protection to families of the Rohingya and host communities.

By drawing on over 40 years of experience in Cox's Bazar and strengthening ties with partners and communities, BRAC delivered crucial support to roughly 1.3 million people from the displaced Rohingya and the host communities in a challenging operational environment.

To ensure that the essential needs of the communities are met, BRAC HCMP has been operating through an integrated, multi-sectoral approach, a strategy that proved its resilience in 2020. The various sectors supported each other, leveraging each other's strengths and diving deep to listen to the communities, finding innovative solutions to evolving needs and devising locally-led interventions.



Community health care centre

Many of the solutions developed by BRAC teams in 2020, helped save lives and increased the resilience of communities for future public health emergencies and natural disasters. The external voices cited in the following chapters, ranging from programme participants to United Nations personnel, emphasise BRAC's holistic approach to humanitarian service delivery.

Despite pandemic-induced hazards, BRAC's health team rolled out an integrated healthcare package focusing on nutrition and psychosocial support. It carried out over 245,000 outpatient consultations in 11 healthcare facilities in the Rohingya camps. Additionally, the education team kept children learning through home-based and remote learning after schools were forced to close.

When the hand-pumped tube wells ran dry, BRAC's water sanitation and hygiene (WASH) team built community water networks, helping ensure access to safe water. As Cyclone Amphan hit, the disaster risk reduction team was ready with volunteers who disseminated awareness messages in the community.

At the core of BRAC's resilience to external shocks is its community-based approach, with the majority of its frontline staff members being from the community they work. The COVID-19 pandemic related movement restrictions prompted humanitarian actors to reduce activity in the camps. BRAC could leverage its extensive network to ensure that community-based volunteers provided crucial services in health, education, protection, and other sectors.

Another highlight was the resourcefulness of BRAC teams in promptly-adopting technical solutions to plug gaps in service delivery. The child protection team created the *Pashe Achhi* (Beside You) tele-education model in record time to engage children and their caregivers when schools were shut. As work dried up for trainees, the skills development programme (SDP) pivoted to manufacturing reusable cloth masks and sanitary napkins, providing them with a source of income. When the community needed a 150-bed COVID-19 isolation centre urgently, BRAC's shelter team completed the construction in just a few days.

Proactive planning, an integrated approach, and a more competent resource and knowledge management mechanism coupled with active community participation allowed BRAC to successfully navigate the complex challenges thrown up in 2020.



A group of women are learning to sew in *Shantikhana* in Camp 4

AGRICULTURE

Strengthening food security, livelihoods, and
forest conservation

Snapshot

"I learnt how to grow vegetables using proper methods so I can reap an increased harvest. Additionally, I received 10 different types of vegetable seeds to kick start growing food in my garden," said Jannat Ara, a participant of BRAC's agriculture programme in Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar. "In order to take good care of my kitchen garden, I also received organic and inorganic fertilisers. After feeding my family, I still have plenty left to sell or share with my neighbours."

Like Jannat Ara, 2,500 women who live in extreme poverty in Ukhiya received training, seeds, fertilisers, and other agricultural inputs from BRAC's agriculture and environment unit, under a project funded by Global Affairs Canada in 2020.

The women grew seasonal vegetables worth BDT 14,000 to BDT 22,000 in 2020, giving them a vital source of income. In addition, the agriculture unit supported poultry rearing groups with over 2,500 participants, where each woman engaged in poultry farming earned or consumed eggs worth roughly BDT 2,400.



Rubela Akhter is picking vegetables from her home garden

Challenges

Agricultural activities halted during

COVID-19: As a countrywide lockdown was implemented from March 2020, all livelihood-related activities, including agriculture, were placed in a lower-priority category. Training centres were also closed during that time, leading to the suspension of training programmes. As a result, many field-based implementation activities, such as training on homestead gardening in the camps, training farmers in the host community, distribution of seeds and fertiliser, and other agricultural extension activities came to a brief halt from March to July 2020.

Supply chain disruption: The pandemic-induced lockdown also meant that

procurement of seeds, fertilisers and other agricultural inputs could not be completed in time. The delay disrupted the seasonal production cycle, even after the authorities granted permission to resume activity in August 2020.

Lack of space for homestead

gardening: BRAC's agriculture unit initiated a homestead gardening project to support people from the Rohingya community to grow vegetables on their own, intending to simultaneously supplement their diet and help them earn some cash. However, the shortage of space in the crowded camps posed a significant challenge to the project's success.

Solutions



Rubela Akter is taking care of her home garden

Adapting to a COVID-19 reality:

After the authorities allowed agriculture-based interventions to resume in August 2020, BRAC's agriculture team adapted the training modules and methodology to shorten the sessions and reduce the number of trainees per session from 25 to 12. This reduction of participants allowed the training to go ahead while observing health regulations.

The team also worked with other departments of the organisation to expedite the procurement process, so that agricultural inputs, including seeds, fertilisers, and equipment, could be delivered to the participants in a short time.

Community group-based gardening: A community group-based homestead gardening approach was taken to address the lack of space in the camps. Under this method, every three to four families used a shared space to grow vegetables. They were provided with technical training on best practices to manage the garden. Equipped with these tools, 22,000 people from the Rohingya community and 5,000 people from the host community were able to grow vegetables to supplement their diet and earn cash.



Tayiba Begum is spreading fertiliser in her garden



Tayiba Begum is harvesting spinach from her garden

Remote management of field activities in the camps:

The BRAC team remotely managed field operations during the COVID-19 restrictions by taking the following steps:

1. Technical assistants stayed in regular communication with community agriculture volunteers
2. In line with the lockdown work plan, technical assistants instructed the community volunteers over a mobile phone to visit programme participants
3. The project work plan during the lockdown was devised by sector specialists and project managers in consultation with senior programme managers
4. Other activities, such as sectoral meetings, weekly planning, report preparation, procurement, logistics, and administrative tasks, were performed online

AYESHA ABED FOUNDATION

Creating opportunities for women
living in vulnerable conditions

Snapshot

After her husband's death, Jahanara Begum became the sole provider of her two children. She also takes care of her elderly mother. One day, she was approached by staff members of the Ayesha Abed Foundation, who offered her an opportunity for training at one of their production centres.

"I learnt sewing and ironing at the Foundation," Jahanara said. "I also made clothes and masks. I saved a tiny portion of my earnings and later bought a cow and goats with it."



A programme participant working on the turpai session



A BRAC staff member is checking the quality of the clothes

The Ayesha Abed Foundation operates a handicrafts production centre in Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar, linked to 14 small subcentres in camps and in host area. With support from UNHCR, BRAC trainers provide on-the-job training on tailoring, hand embroidery, and screen printing to women from the host and camp communities living in extreme poverty.

Aarong takes handmade products from these centres to retail them in the market, which supports the artisans with a source of income.

Challenges

Halted by COVID-19: Orders dried up with the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020, forcing the closure of the production centres in Ukhiya for four months. The centres struggled to provide a regular income for the artisans, which placed the participants in a precarious position.

Lack of skilled artisans: The trainee artisans are carefully selected from families living in extreme poverty and vulnerable situations to ensure maximum benefit from the training. In 2020, due to the COVID-19

restrictions, it was more challenging to get suitable candidates for the project. Since the trainees were unfamiliar with working in a formal facility, a lack of discipline was an issue.

Local political interference: The manager at the production centre often faced pressure from local influential people to recruit their chosen candidates. As a result, the recruitment of suitable candidates posed more challenges.

Solutions



Programme participants are learning sewing at the BRAC Centre

Turning to mask production: The production centre negotiated an order of approximately 300,000 masks from UNHCR. This order helped the main production centre stay busy from July 2020 onwards. Other orders also trickled in, giving the artisans some much-needed cash. However, there weren't enough orders to engage the artisans at the sub-centres, and they were given a monthly stipend of BDT 6,000 to support them through the difficult period.

Employee training and counselling: After the production centre reopened in July 2020, the managers stepped up the training and counselling procedures for the trainees. The orientation sessions emphasised teamwork and collegiality. As the teams settled into their work, the disciplinary issues improved significantly.

Navigating local sensibilities: The managers at the production centres worked closely with the BRAC HCMP operations team and security team to deal with pressure from vested quarters. A transparent and fair recruitment criteria helped alleviate some of the pressure from locally influential people.



A programme participant is doing hand embroidery

CHILD PROTECTION

Creating a safe haven for children

Snapshot

Five-year-old Asma used to wait impatiently for her mother's phone to ring. When it did, she eagerly spoke to the person one of BRAC's play leaders at the other end, listening, smiling, and reciting nursery rhymes. The play leader spoke with her on the phone, and later with her mother, asking how she had been coping during the COVID-19 shutdown and offering tips about teaching her at home.

"Asma couldn't go to the centre because everything was closed due to the pandemic," says Nur Banu, her mother.

"It's great that BRAC's teachers regularly reached out to her over the phone."

As part of its focus on early childhood development, BRAC's child protection programme with the help of BRAC Institution of Educational Development, launched the innovative tele-conversation model *Pashe Achhi* (Beside You) to teach children aged 2 – 6 years who were stuck at home during the pandemic.



A teacher is calling the students to inquire about the status of their studies



During COVID-19 pandemic a child is on the phone with her teacher discussing homework

The child protection team also started *Mon er Jotno Mobile e* (mental health support on the phone) – an innovative initiative to provide parents and caregivers with psychosocial backing during the pandemic. The counselling and support were delivered to the Rohingya community in their own dialect.

Before all child protection centres had to be shut down due to COVID-19, BRAC provided education and protection to children, adolescents, and their parents mainly through the humanitarian Play Lab model, developed in collaboration with the Sesame Workshop.

Despite the shutdowns, the Play Lab programme adapted and reached 50,000 children (almost equal numbers of boys and girls) in and around 28 camps in 2020.

Life skills-based education for adolescents in the multi-purpose centres was cut short in March 2020, but reached approximately 700 adolescents aged between 15 and 18 in 2020.

Challenges

Coping with COVID-19: BRAC adopted alternative mechanisms after all the education and play centres were ordered to remain closed during the pandemic.

"As we had been working with child protection, we had to deliver critical services," said Riffat Jahan Nahreen, team leader of the child protection programme. "If we abandoned the children, they would have fallen behind, and some might have become victims of violence."

Adapting the curricula and developing a distance learning model in a short time, as well as creating a database of participant contact information, were the significant challenges.

Lack of 3G/4G connectivity: Poor connectivity in the camps was a significant barrier to effective distance learning and digital communication. The cellular network had been operating at a lower capacity in the area. Internet connectivity was completely lost several times during the day, which made online learning almost impossible.

Increase in domestic violence: During the pandemic, domestic violence, gender-based violence (GBV), and mental health problems spiked. BRAC's child protection team struggled to provide adequate services to the participants due to a lack of access and the closure of service delivery centres. In some cases, this required making risky trips into the camps.

Solutions



A child is speaking with her teacher over the phone about her school work

Going digital — *Pashe Achhi* : The BRAC team decided to shift operations to the digital platform, to adapt to the pandemic-induced shutdown. The *Pashe Achhi* (Beside You) tele-education and *Mon er Jotno Mobile e* (mental health support on the phone) support initiatives were born out of that determination to adapt.

The child protection unit gathered 37 play-based curriculum developers and 37 psychologists to rapidly develop a curriculum integrating wellbeing with learning, through play-based approaches to create *Pashe Achhi*. Under the initiative, BRAC's play leaders delivered 20-minute lessons on the phone several times a week, and ensured caregivers got instructions on nurturing positive relationships with their children.

Protecting children in vulnerable conditions:

BRAC provided comprehensive case management support across 16 camps to help children and adolescents who had faced different types of violence, physical and sexual abuse, neglect, exploitation, and mental disorders. The child protection unit handled 830 cases (477 boys and 353 girls) during 2020. A total of 446 children with disabilities (251 boys and 195 girls) received support from BRAC.

Providing mental health and psychosocial

support: Clinical mental health consultation was provided to 283 parents (111 men and 172 women). BRAC recruited women in the intervention process as community para counsellors. Individual psychosocial support sessions conducted by community para counsellors benefited 3,633 children and 7,978 parents (3,080 men and 4,898 women).

Kristen Hayes, coordinator of Unicef's child protection unit, said: "BRAC is an active member of the sub-sector and regularly volunteers to take on tasks outside their role, purely to support the sub-sector as a whole."

She added: "BRAC co-led the ad hoc working group for emergency preparedness and response, and played this leadership role exceptionally well. Despite the COVID-19 restrictions, it ensured that the child protection actors were prepared to respond to emergencies."



Child protection actors continued to respond to emergencies during the pandemic

COMMUNITY-BASED PROTECTION

Strengthening community resilience,
restoring dignity

Snapshot

Throughout the pandemic, BRAC's volunteers have been visiting our homes to check on us, and ask about how we are doing, "said Muhammad Kalu, an inhabitant of the Rohingya camp. "When we face any problem, the volunteers step forward. They take special care of the young and the elderly members of our community. This is important to us."

BRAC's community-based protection unit conducted over 18,000 awareness sessions on lifesaving messages in 2020, reaching 40,000 men, 20,000 women, 12,000 girls, 17,000 boys, and 646 persons with disabilities.

The unit also handled approximately 45,000 protection-related complaints, feedback, and queries from the camps in 2020. Among these, over 29,000 reports were lodged by men and over 16,000 were lodged by women.

When COVID-19 halted most activities in the camps, the community-based protection volunteers carried out approximately 14,000 home visits, reaching over 26,000 women and almost an equal number of men.



BRAC workers receive complaints and feedback from community members

Challenges

Disruption of outreach: BRAC's community-based protection unit had to suspend camp visits by staff members after the authorities imposed COVID-19 restrictions in March 2020. These restrictions created a gap with the community. Uncertainty shrouded BRAC's critical protection services, such as door-to-door visits, counselling, and referrals, which were plausibly coming to a halt.

Misinformation and rumours: Misinformation and rumours about COVID-19 spread rapidly in the camps during the lockdown, spurred by a lack of credible and reliable information within the community. These rumours were a matter of grave

concern, as they threatened to facilitate the spread of the disease and create stigma among communities living in vulnerable conditions. It was hard to do counter-messaging, as the community centres, where people usually came for information, were closed.

Perils for the elderly: Vulnerable community members, such as the elderly and persons with disabilities, were in danger of being left behind during the lockdown as support services dwindled. For the community-based protection unit, this posed a significant challenge, as normal community-based activities were not possible at that time.

Solutions



Community-led initiative supported by humanitarian actors to support one-day meal

Mobilising volunteers networks:

The BRAC team adapted to the changed situation by relying on community-based volunteers to keep critical outreach services going. Since these volunteers were already in the camps, they had no problems with access. BRAC mobilised volunteers through phone-based instructions and orientation. Since door-to-door counselling and messaging were impossible, the volunteers took Bluetooth-enabled radios and speakers to camp blocks and played pre-recorded messages.

Rumour tracking and debunking: The community-based protection unit took the initiative to track rumours circulating within the camps systematically. When volunteers picked up on rumours, they would report back to the staff. The rumours would then be analysed and addressed using pre-approved audio messages created by the communicating with communities (CwC) working group.

Caring for the elderly: The community-based protection unit mobilised specialised community volunteers who were trained and equipped to support elderly residents. These volunteers identified vulnerable people and provided support, including food delivery, mobility, and healthcare during the lockdown.

Hannah Cochrane, protection officer at UNHCR, said: "BRAC maintained their commitment to refugees and their community-based programme during COVID-19, thus ensuring the hard work of refugees in building their community structures in past years was not lost due to the pandemic."



A group of Rohingya women receiving training

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Enhancing disaster resilience

Snapshot

Begum Jan had to wade through knee-deep water to get to the grocery shop located on a nearby hilltop. Now, she uses a bamboo bridge built by BRAC's disaster risk reduction team to cross safely and with dignity. "People from both Bangladeshi and Rohingya communities use the bridge, which has also improved the relationship between these two communities," said Begum Jan.

In 2020, BRAC's disaster risk reduction unit built 10 such bridges, and constructed staircases and drains in the Rohingya camps and surrounding areas, where approximately 95,000 people live. The team strengthened disaster resilience by training 50 volunteers on emergency response procedures. Additionally, the team implemented BRAC's reforestation programme in the camp areas to counteract environmental degradation, which benefited over 150,000 people in the camps.



Disaster risk reduction unit built bridges to connect hills to make travel and transportation easier

Challenges

Volunteer training halted: BRAC's disaster risk reduction unit in Cox's Bazar trained youth volunteers in the community on cyclone preparedness and disaster resilience. The training came to a halt in March 2020, after the authorities declared a lockdown in response to the pandemic. With monsoon and cyclone season approaching, the unit faced a challenge to keep up the community's level of preparedness.

Cyclone Amphan: On 19 May 2020, Cyclone Amphan struck the coasts of Bangladesh, including Cox's Bazar. Living in crowded camps on steep hills, thousands of Rohingya families are at risk of elevated danger when such disasters strike. The risk of flooding and landslides induced by the cyclone posed an imminent threat to the families, in addition to the high winds brought on by it.

Solutions



Children are evacuated to higher grounds during floods in Camp 2W, Ukhiya

E-volunteering: During the COVID-19 lockdown and Cyclone Amphan, the disaster risk reduction unit piloted e-volunteering with community-based volunteers. Through this, the volunteers managed to disseminate messages effectively among the nearby communities on health and safety issues, including evacuation to cyclone shelters. The disaster risk reduction unit set up a mobile phone-based system to orient and instruct the volunteers during this period.

During Amphan, the volunteers disseminated messages that instructed families to tie down their roofs and place sandbags around the edges of their homes to prevent flooding.

Community-based resilience: The BRAC team involved the local communities in constructing disaster-resilient infrastructure, to improve resilience to future disasters. This included building and maintaining staircases to enable easier access up the hilly areas, covering 550 square metres for 128 households in 2020. Drains were constructed to reduce waterlogging over 187 square metres, where 109 families live. BRAC also supported the community reconstruction of connecting brick roads of 655 square metres, helping 144 families.



Skills-based training for community volunteers under the Cyclone preparedness programme



Skills-based training for community volunteers under the Cyclone preparedness programme

Emergency response volunteer

group: Soon after the withdrawal of COVID-19 restrictions, the disaster risk reduction unit resumed with volunteer training. Despite the COVID-related disruptions, a total of 50 volunteers (35 men and 15 women) received cyclone preparedness training in 2020. All the participants came from the adjacent host communities but were trained to work in host and camp communities during emergencies.

Tanveer Bhanger, team leader of the World Food Programme's disaster risk reduction unit in Cox's Bazar, said: "Creating ownership among community members is key to sustainable disaster risk reduction, and BRAC's approach of involving communities from inception helps build this sense of responsibility and ownership among the communities."

EDUCATION

Learning during COVID-19

Snapshot

11-year-old Maksud was unhappy that he could not go to school, which was closed due to the pandemic. Then, to his delight, school came to his home.

“The teacher visited our house to teach my children and some of the neighbouring kids in a small group,” said Mohammad Taher, Maksud's father. “I'm glad he could continue his lessons during the shutdown.”



A teacher visits an empty classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic to collect some books



BRAC's team, comprising 773 Burmese-language instructors from the Rohingya community and 923 teachers from the host community, started home-based teaching and tele-learning to help children cope with the prolonged shutdown, carrying on a critical service during the pandemic.

Children have gathered inside a house, waiting for their teacher to start the class

Challenges

Pandemic-induced closure: In 2020, the pandemic forced the closure of learning centres operated by BRAC both in and around the Rohingya camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf. Among the 923 learning centres, 773 centres operated inside the camps and 150 in the host community. As a result of the shutdown, over 65,000 children from the age of 4-14 years were in danger of falling behind in their education.

Space constraints: BRAC has long laboured to find adequate space in the camps to set up a sufficient number of learning centres. In 2020, until the pandemic forced the closure of the centres, it struggled to accommodate all the children who wanted to enrol. Additionally, many learning centres were made of bamboo, which became derelict in 2020 after two years of use.

"The challenge was to find a solution that would be durable and could accommodate more children, and at the same time, would not go against the government's prohibition

of permanent structures," said Khan Mohammad Ferdous, sector lead of BRAC's education sector unit in Cox's Bazar.

Lack of connectivity in the camps:

As BRAC tried to switch to a distance learning model in response to the pandemic, call drops and lack of adequate 3G/4G connectivity in the camps emerged as a significant barrier. Some areas in the camps had no connectivity, severely hindering children's education and interaction with teachers.

Lack of qualified teachers: BRAC requires teachers from the host community to have a secondary school certificate. Since most people in the Rohingya community lack certificates of formal education, it was difficult to evaluate their educational qualifications. Overall, it was a challenge to find qualified teachers in the camps, and this became even more acute in 2020, because of the pandemic.

Solutions



A teacher makes weekly home visits to various students' homes to teach them in groups

Home-based learning: To mitigate the impact of prolonged school closure, BRAC switched to home-schooling and distance learning. The teachers developed daily lesson plans and instructed the students over the phone. Burmese-language instructors, part of the Rohingya community, made door-to-door visits, teaching small groups of children while observing health regulations.

"In addition, our volunteer groups and parents were oriented to help the children," said Ferdous.

Selam Berhanu, education officer at UNHCR, said: "Despite the challenges that arose from the closure of the learning centres due to the COVID-19 pandemic from 17 March 2020, BRAC continued to provide expanded education support to children living in the Rohingya camps, implementing caregiver-led education through disseminating the caregiver-led guidelines, key messages among parents and caregivers."

She added: "BRAC further facilitated the Burmese language instructors who managed to visit 8-10 households per day to support children to learn at home."

The two-storied classroom: After experimenting with various designs for a two-storied structure to accommodate more children, BRAC built eight two-storied learning centres with steel frames in January 2020.

Khan Mohammad Ferdous, education sector lead for BRAC, said that the structure was semi-permanent and culturally sensitive, which proved to be popular with humanitarian aid agencies. BRAC planned to build 100 steel-frame schools in 2020, although the plan was postponed due to COVID-19 and delays in obtaining regulatory approval.



A two-storied learning centre built by BRAC

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE (GBV)

Protecting the vulnerable

Snapshot

Jahida used to call it *shantikhana* (Women-friendly space). "Life was full of hardships. This is where I came to seek peace," said the 25-year-old woman living in the Rohingya camp, as she discusses her experience at the BRAC-operated safe space for women and girls. Jahida visited her *shantikhana* at least thrice a week.

During the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, gender-based violence spiked in the Rohingya camps. For many women, the safe spaces represented an oasis of calm. As part of the gender-based violence protection sub-sector, 8 centres were operated for women, while 5 centres were run to engage men and boys to take a stand against gender-based violence in the camps.



A teacher is teaching women to study in Camp 4, Ukhiya



Rohingya women are learning to sew in *Shantikhana* in Camp 4, Ukhiya

The safe spaces provided a haven for women living in vulnerable conditions. They also offered multiple protection services, such as group counselling, skills training, literacy sessions, psychosocial support, and case management.

Mansura, another participant, said she was satisfied with the progress she made despite the hardship caused by the pandemic. "I learned to write 'a-b-c's at the centre. I also learned to write my name," she said. "Soon, I learned how to sew. Visiting the centre made me feel alive and stronger. Being with the others, I no longer felt alone."

Challenges

A spike in violence: Studies have reported a sharp increase in intimate partner violence among Rohingyas during the pandemic. When COVID-19 forced the closure of most camp-based activities, those who experienced domestic violence continued receiving case management and psychosocial support as an essential service.

Patriarchal attitudes: The prolonged shutdown during the pandemic increased tensions in many households. Many men acted aggressively towards women and children. For the BRAC team, it was crucial to engage men and boys to combat gender-based violence .

Solutions



Sewing training is provided by female instructors in *Shantikhana*

Safe spaces: Despite the crippling effect of the pandemic in 2020, survivors of violence received support and referral services from trained caseworkers.

Families received psychosocial support and life-saving information on COVID-19 through door-to-door visits of the community-based counsellors. Although it was challenging to implement this activity during the lockdown, it was a lifeline for many women living in vulnerable conditions.

Women living in Rohingya camps continued receiving literacy, financial and vocational training such as sewing, pottery, and household budgeting through the safe spaces. However, some activities were curtailed during the lockdown.

Engaging men and boys: Recognising the spike in gender-based violence during the pandemic, men and boys living in the Rohingya camps were engaged in 5 centres, equipping them to take a stand against gender-based violence in their community. Instead of viewing men as perpetrators, the aim had been to turn them into agents of change. The activities and counselling sessions were designed to change the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of gender relations, early marriage, and home-based violence. .

Case management: Women often lack any social support in the camps when a partner or a male relative abuses them. To counter the increased vulnerability during COVID-19, case management support, including counselling, and referral to legal, health, or shelter services were provided to women living in vulnerable conditions.

Terra MacKinnon, gender-based violence officer at UNHCR, said: "BRAC is a solutions-oriented partner that can pivot or innovate when faced with challenges. The technically sound and dedicated team is a pleasure to work with. Together we have advanced new programme models and continuously adapted to the COVID-19 operational context."



Engaging men and boys in their community to take a stand against gender-based violence

HEALTH AND NUTRITION

Making health services sustainable

Snapshot

Hajera Begum (37) was pleasantly surprised to discover that the BRAC healthcare centre near her home had started a one-stop service encompassing medical care and nutrition support.

She is one of many people who have benefited from this integrated service delivery model, one of the innovative solutions that BRAC has launched in the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar in 2020.

"My entire family gets medical help from this place," said Hajera. "It has made a huge difference to our community."



A child's weight is being measured under nutrition activity

Challenges

Improving coordination and resource management:

Finding adequate resources to keep crucial services going, engaging government and non-governmental stakeholders, overcoming logistical issues, and improving coordination were at the forefront of BRAC's healthcare efforts in 2020.

Umesh Kattel, public health officer at UNHCR said, it was essential to streamline approval processes and strengthen mutual information sharing with the authorities and humanitarian actors to provide better healthcare service to the community.

"BRAC, as the largest healthcare provider in the camps, is a crucial part of the joint efforts in this direction," Kattel said.

Upgrading makeshift structures:

The bamboo and corrugated iron structures built to provide healthcare services in the early days of the Rohingya influx were no longer viable in 2020. Most provided an inadequate environment to meet the health needs of the affected communities. Services were scattered across facilities, which meant community members faced difficulties accessing them.

Combating the pandemic: The COVID-19 pandemic, which reached the camps in April 2020, threatened to roll back any progress made so far in the healthcare and nutrition sector. The pandemic-induced lockdowns resulted in movement restrictions, giving rise to human resources challenges related to stress and apprehension.

Solutions



A doctor is explaining the prescription to the patient

Despite a myriad of challenges, a total of 387,837 different services were provided at 11 health centres by 250 staff members (clinical and field workers) and 350 volunteers of BRAC's healthcare team in 2020. On average, 1,132 patients received support every day.

Improved infrastructure, better

service delivery: Ten health centres were upgraded in the camps, which helped provide critical services, especially sexual and reproductive healthcare, maternal, neonatal, child and adolescent healthcare, non-communicable diseases, and mental healthcare. The upgraded infrastructure represented a significant progress in a fragile operating environment.

Dr AFM Mahbubul Alam, BRAC's health sector lead in the Rohingya camps, said, "Although the number of service seekers did not increase due to COVID-19 in the community, patient satisfaction, quality of services, infection prevention, and control measures improved due to the improved infrastructure."

One-stop integrated healthcare: BRAC

successfully launched an integrated health service delivery model so that patients could receive a holistic spectrum of services from the same centre, including life-saving care, nutrition advice and psychosocial support.

Over 100,000 people received support from nutritionists at BRAC's health centres in 2020. Among them, approximately 45,000 were from the camps and 55,000 from the host community.



A mother, with her child, visits a BRAC health center in Palangkhali to check on their health



Patients show the doctor's prescription to obtain medication from the clinic's pharmacy

Combatting COVID-19: Keeping services going during the pandemic and limiting the rate of infections were significant successes for BRAC's health team, according to Dr Mahbubul Alam. The first-ever Severe Acute Respiratory Infection (SARI) treatment centre was constructed, which contributed to the treatment of COVID-19 patients. Community health workers and volunteers visited the assigned households, disseminated COVID-19 preventive messages, and distributed personal hygiene materials that helped fight COVID-19.

BRAC ensured staff safety by introducing 14-day rotations, physical distancing requirements, and counselling services and support to alleviate staff concerns.

Dr Egmond Samir Evers, Health Sector Coordinator at WHO said, BRAC's resilience in the face of the pandemic helped keep COVID-19 at bay and provided vital support to the broader humanitarian community.

"We worked together to share resources and support each other to keep serving the community, and BRAC was a critical component of that success," Dr Evers said.

LEGAL PROTECTION

Access to justice for all

Snapshot

"Without your help, it would not be possible for me to get rid of this continuous torture. I was unable to report it due to fear of social stigma as I cannot give birth to a child. Still, now I am free, and it will help me start a new life," said Fatema, a woman from the Rohingya community, after receiving legal assistance from BRAC.

According to a study from UNICEF that involves qualitative and quantitative inquiry, family disputes, intimate partner violence, and grievous criminal cases involving marital issues, missing persons, community disputes, child marriage, and rape increased in the camps during the COVID-19 pandemic. BRAC's legal protection team supported the survivors through intervening in and outside the camps on receiving emergency requests from camp officials. The legal protection team visited police stations, detention centres, and mortuaries to ensure justice.



Survivors receive support and counselling from BRAC's legal protection centre



BRAC's legal protection team communicated with camp officials to secure remedies for survivors

During the challenging phase of COVID-19, people in need of legal support received counselling over the phone. After hearing from the survivors, paralegals also visited alleged perpetrators' homes, and the legal team provided counselling to both parties of a dispute to ensure peace and safety.

BRAC's legal protection team filed 19 police cases and 3 court cases related to serious criminal offences like grievous hurt, rape, and attempt to rape. The team also filed missing person's lawsuits at police stations during the strict restrictions of the pandemic, mainly from March 2020 to July 2021.

During COVID-19 restrictions, the camp-in-charge handled many cases. Some survivors came to BRAC's legal aid counsellors with their grievances on some community leaders being partial and speaking in favour of the perpetrators because they failed to fulfil their demand for money. In this type of situation, BRAC's legal team communicated with camp officials and ensured proper representation of the victim's problems, helping to secure appropriate remedies.

Challenges

Justice delayed is justice denied:

BRAC's legal team physically visited the camps twice a week to advocate with camp officials. Sometimes a camp-in-charge would send requests for support. To meet the challenge of ensuring justice on time, alternative dispute resolution sessions were conducted by lawyers and paralegals. It was challenging to confirm the presence of the relevant parties on that specific date. Among all the legal protection activities, mediation is the most important as the parties can sit together to identify their differences and then think of options for resolution. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the legal team conducted several mediations under challenging circumstances.

Long-term restriction on conducting awareness-raising sessions:

BRAC's legal protection unit conducts awareness sessions on various legal issues by highlighting Bangladesh's existing laws and procedures. The legal team visits the blocks in the camps to raise awareness of marital matters, dowries, rape, child marriage, domestic violence, trafficking,

murder, and police procedures. After authorities imposed restrictions on conducting awareness-raising sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic, legal protection teams could not reach the community with their messages.

Jail visits by relatives of detainees curtailed:

Before the pandemic hit, people from the Rohingya community in Cox's Bazar jail were able to meet their family members once a month with transportation support from BRAC. After the pandemic started, jail authorities imposed restrictions, and relatives of detainees were not permitted to visit them in jail.

Gaps in communication and advocacy with law enforcement agencies:

In the camp context, to protect the legal rights of people, coordination between the local government authorities, the police, and legal partners is crucial. Due to restricted movement in the camps during the pandemic, the legal team could not visit police stations and detention centres as needed, creating a gap.

Solutions



BRAC paralegal is reporting victims' case to camp-in-charge (CIC)

Utilising the ability of paralegals:

Two paralegals were present at BRAC's legal aid centre every day during the strict lockdown phase. They visited the camp-in-charge's office and maintained the primary information of people in need of assistance in their notebooks. They held regular communication with lawyers through online platforms like Whatsapp.

Referring cases to the camp-in-charge by communicating over the phone:

In some cases, such as disputes within the Rohingya community, the victims' protection is the most pressing issue. To ensure protection of people in extreme vulnerability, BRAC's emergency legal team referred such cases to the camp-in-charge and maintained communication with law enforcement agencies. The legal team then followed up with those people and provided further support when they managed to go to the camps.

Post-mortem support: During the lockdown, transport support was available for cases of unnatural deaths. BRAC's legal team ensured the presence of family members during the post-mortem procedure and handed over the body to the family.

Distribution of posters and flyers: Posters containing hotline numbers were distributed to the community to make legal services available to the highest number of people. Paralegals ensured distribution by maintaining COVID-19 health measures. As a result of this publicity, BRAC legal protection team received several cases through direct phone calls.

Awareness-raising through audio tools: During the COVID-19 restrictions, in the absence of regular camp visits by the legal team, BRAC's paralegals played a vital role in conducting door-to-door visits and disseminating awareness material developed by communicating with community (CwC) working group, which included printed and audio materials.



BRAC volunteer distributing flyers

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

Creating opportunities for young people

Snapshot

"BRAC trained me in tailoring, and I have been using that skill to make masks", said Romida, a woman from the Rohingya community.

"I get paid for the masks I make. I'm an orphan, so I use that money to buy food, medicine, and clothes for myself."

During 2020, trainees from BRAC's skills development programme manufactured 400,000 pieces of reusable cloth masks, and 1,000 pieces of reusable sanitary napkins, giving them a vital source of income. Approximately 120 women seamstresses were involved in the production of masks and napkins.



A woman receives payment for making masks

Challenges

Training programme interrupted:

BRAC's skills development programme was halted for seven months, from March to September 2020, due to the pandemic. This closure created a delay in certification for the on-the-job trainees in the host community, as they could not receive instructions or travel to their job location regularly. Nearly 3,600 participants from the Rohingya community were unable to attend training sessions and earn incomes through it.

Ensuring payment to trainees: Many of the trainees, including apprentice tailors, welders and carpenters, had joined their new job placements before the lockdown began in

March, and expected to receive their payments from the programme. Since staff could not travel in the field, the unit faced a logistical challenge to pay the trainees.

Gender imbalance: Cox's Bazar's conservative atmosphere often makes it difficult to get young women to enrol in vocational training or travel far from their homes for an on-the-job apprenticeship. This challenge became even more acute in 2020, because of the pandemic as it further restricted women's mobility. BRAC's skills development team struggled to recruit women trainees in 2020.

Solutions



Mask-making training programme in Camp 1 East, Ukhiya

Pivot to mask and napkin

production: After COVID-related restrictions forced the closure of scheduled training in tailoring, handicraft production and solar panel maintenance, the programme pivoted to producing face masks and napkins. Along with the World Food Programme, who were the donors for this project, BRAC staff members successfully advocated with the local administration to produce cloth masks and reusable napkins in response to the urgent demand during the pandemic.

Supporting employers and employees:

Throughout the seven months of the shutdown and beyond, the skills development team worked with the host community employees, master trainers, and apprentices to counsel them on safe ways to continue working together. They were given technical advice and masks and sanitisers to create a safe work environment. The team was in the field during the shutdown, trying to keep the programme going.

Adopting mobile payments: The BRAC team worked with other departments to expedite the payment of trainees through alternative methods during the pandemic. Mobile payments such as bKash were used to send money to the programme participants on time.

Parent meetings and counselling: Community outreach was conducted, including parent meetings and counselling sessions to address the lack of women trainees. Staff discussed safe ways so that women could attend on-the-job training, especially in vocations such as tailoring. The unit also used successful women artisans as role models to encourage young women to enter training programmes.



A woman is making masks in Camp 22, Unchiprang

SHELTER

Providing a safe and dignified space

Snapshot

Salim Ullah, a resident of a camp in UKhiya, said strong winds damaged the bamboo and tarpaulin roof of his hut. But he managed to repair it quickly, with help from BRAC's shelter sector. "We feel taken care of, because we receive prompt support when our shelters are damaged. BRAC stood by me when I needed to rebuild my shelter and also provided tarpaulin for the roof," he said.

In 2020, over 1,300 shelters were constructed and approximately 10,000 shelters were maintained by BRAC's shelter team. As part of its shelter activity, BRAC also constructed 3,367 metres of the bamboo bridge, 9,690 metres of stairs/steps, 20,203 metres of drains, and 25,362 metres of retaining walls.



Workers are cutting bamboo in Kachubonia

Challenges

High maintenance bamboo

shelters: There was a growing challenge in 2020, as thousands of bamboo shelters built in 2018 and 2019 became derelict. Bamboo usually deteriorates within a year and becomes almost unusable after two years. The shelter sector was busy repairing and maintaining old shelters to provide adequate support to camp residents. Monsoon rain and landslides ruined many staircases and drains, which required rebuilding.

The impact of COVID-19: Most maintenance operations and training sessions came to a halt from March to August 2020, because of the pandemic. Without the ability to travel to the field, the unit faced a logistical challenge to keep track of maintenance needs.

Solutions



Houses are being built with bamboo in Kachubonia

Improved shelters: BRAC and other organisations have been exploring improved technology for shelters to address the problem of short lifespan bamboo shelters. In addition to the four bamboo treatment plants which were already set up, two more were established in 2020.

In 2020, the emphasis was on establishing improved shelters with a concrete base and treated bamboo. The treated bamboo lasts three times as long as untreated bamboo. In 2020, the shelter sector also sought government permission to construct two-storied steel structures which could shelter two families in the space of one household. Although written permission was granted, a verbal stay on the construction put the plan on hold until 2021.

Community-led do-it-yourself maintenance: The Rohingya community members in the camps were trained to maintain their shelters, reducing the burden on the shelter sector. When setting up new shelters, the family was required to contribute half the resources through labour under a new scheme, while BRAC would provide the other half. This activity was paused between March and August 2020.



A person from Rohingya community is taking bamboo to bamboo treatment plant



Bamboo is being taken from the storage to build shelters

Coordination and training with site management:

The shelter unit attempted to improve coordination and needs assessments by harmonising construction and maintenance standards with other sectors while training site management to spot repair needs. The training helped the site management team to assess the maintenance situation using pre-defined criteria and report back to the shelter sector. This harmonisation reduced the burden on the shelter sector to assess needs on the ground and cut response times.

Colin Price, shelter officer at UNHCR, said, "We faced many challenges in the shelter sector in 2020. We couldn't have overcome those challenges without BRAC. BRAC fulfilled our expectations and went the extra mile when needed."

He added: "Just as an example, other organisations are getting treated bamboo from BRAC's treatment plants. And when we needed a 150-bed COVID-19 isolation centre urgently, BRAC's shelter team completed the construction in record time."

SITE MANAGEMENT

Managing camps, coordinating services

Snapshot

"Whenever we have a problem in the camp block, site management is there to solve it", said Mohammad Osman, a member of the Rohingya community. "During floods, the team makes sure people have evacuated to high grounds. They also assess the damage of the shelter after the floods or fires."



Orientation session for site management sector (SMS) volunteer



BRAC's site management unit plays a crucial role by assessing needs on the ground and providing referrals to other sectors. The team also facilitates community-led construction and repair of pathways, bridges, and stairs to facilitate safe movement in the camps, mainly through the monsoon season.

A family is relocated due to landslides in Camp 17, Ukhiya

Challenges

Assessing needs: The central task of assessing camp-level needs and providing referrals to various sectors are done by the site management sector. Conducting needs assessments became a major challenge in 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced limitations on staff entry to the camps. Effective referrals and service delivery became difficult since most humanitarian agencies reduced staff numbers.

Coordination between sectors: The various sectors rely on site management to coordinate activities. In 2020, coordination was challenging because of COVID-induced lockdowns. Site management faced the additional challenge of coordinating the pandemic response in the camps. As the government planned to relocate some Rohingya families to the Bhasan Char island in late 2020, special attention and sensitivity were required to coordinate with the local authorities.

Solutions



Volunteers instructing the displaced families to wait for clear weather before returning to shelters

Coping with the pandemic: The site management sector put contingency measures to keep services going during the COVID-19 lockdown. The unit relied on community-based volunteers who had access to the camps. These volunteers not only carried on routine assessments but also assessed COVID-related needs. The BRAC site management unit helped coordinate severe acute respiratory infection (SARI) isolation centres in the camp areas, which were critical to providing health support to the community. Support was given to other sectors to carry out COVID-19 hygiene awareness campaigns.

Improving coordination: In 2020, the site management sector improved coordination with other sectors, despite disruptions caused by the pandemic. Initiatives were taken to standardise assessment criteria with various sectors to streamline referrals. Particular emphasis was given to strengthening relationships and coordination with local authorities, including the camp-in-charge, and the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC).

Following Cyclone Amphan in May 2020, the volunteers assessed damage from the storm and reported to the shelter, disaster risk reduction, and other sectors through site management. These helped coordinate the response, which alleviated the risk to the camp community.



The retaining wall has broken down due to heavy rain in Camp 5, Ukhiya

WASH

Safe water, clean environment

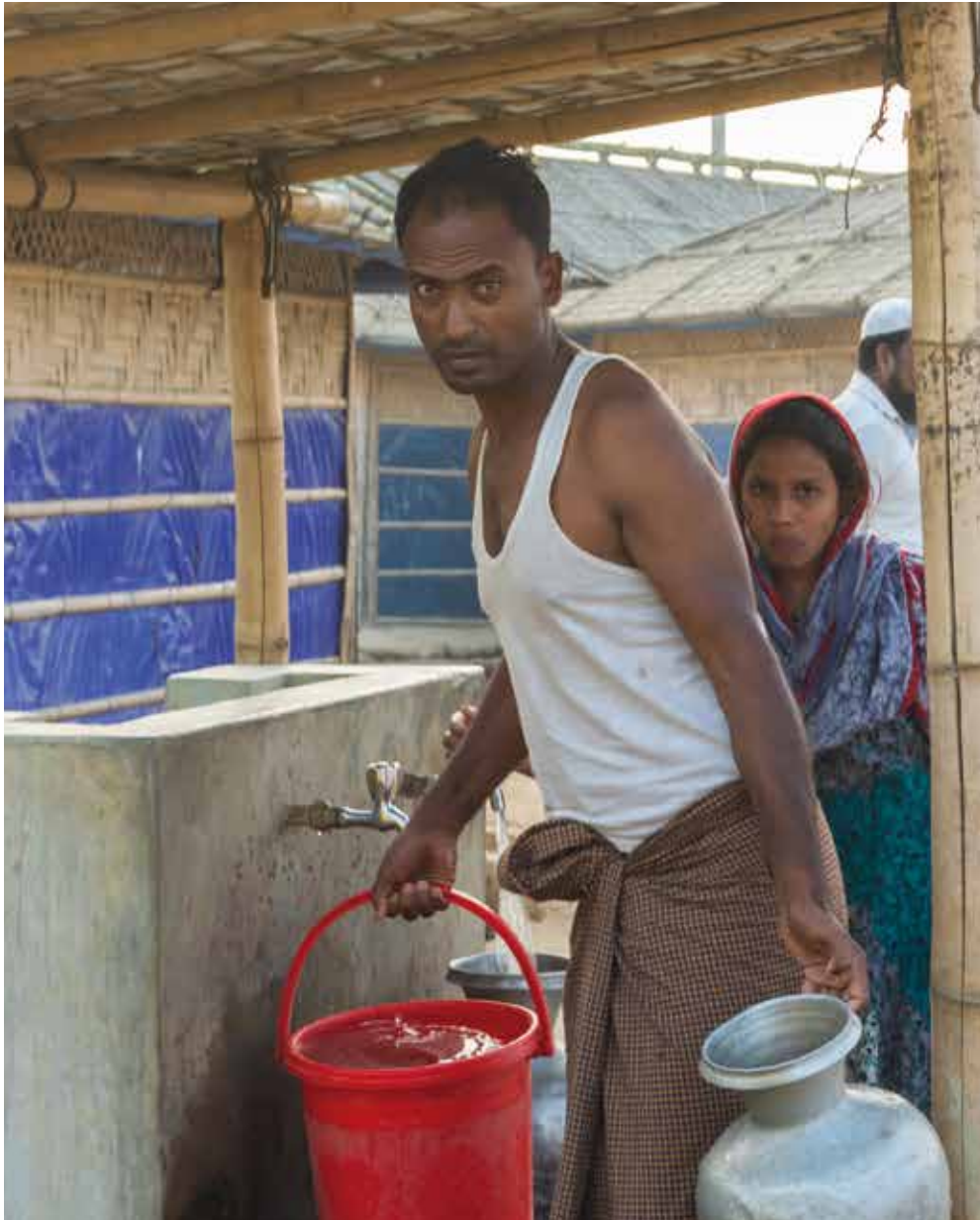
Snapshot

When the hand-pumped tube well close to her hut ran dry in the winter of 2020, Anjuma Khatun worried about accessing clean water for her family. A long walk to get water would give her less time to cook and force her to leave her four-year-old daughter unattended for quite a long time. Her concerns were alleviated when neighbours told her about a community water network that BRAC had installed in their block.

"The water network has several taps, so we don't have to quarrel over access to the tube well anymore. It is such a relief," Anjuma said.



A woman collects water from a tap in Camp 4, Ukhiya



A Rohingya man and a woman are carrying tap water in Camp 4, Ukhiya

Access to safe and sufficient drinking water, improved sanitation, and solid waste disposal have been grave concerns in the Rohingya camps. These challenges were exacerbated in 2020 because of the pandemic, as demand for safe water and hygiene products increased due to COVID-19 health regulations.

Critical activities were carried out in the camps, including installation and maintenance of infrastructures such as water networks and latrines, bathing cubicles, faecal sludge and solid waste management, water quality tests, hygiene promotion, and cleaning campaigns, covering nearly 250,000 people in the camps and more than 65,000 in the host community in 2020.

Challenges

Safe access to water points during

COVID-19: People crowding around tube wells to collect water during the pandemic posed an additional safety risk. There were not enough handwashing stations to meet hygiene requirements. It was also challenging to conduct hygiene training sessions in the usual, in-person way.

Falling water table: The groundwater levels around the Rohingya camps have fallen by approximately five to nine metres because of excessive dependence on groundwater. The crisis worsened in early 2020 as tube wells, the primary water source, started to dry up. Experts are worried that continued pressure on the aquifer may result in saltwater intrusion, leaving the water undrinkable.

Waste matters: Since the Rohingya camps were set up as short-term shelters, no provisions were made for large-scale solid waste management. There were few places for the community to dump solid waste and virtually no way to move the debris and

sludge away from the camp locations. Solid waste and sludge, accumulated since 2018, became an acute problem in 2020, creating a toxic environment.

“WASH is often an afterthought,” said Farukh Hossain Khan, sector lead of the BRAC water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) unit. But it's a part of life we cannot do without.”

Hygiene behaviour: BRAC struggled to counter ingrained habits in the community regarding open defecation and dumping of solid waste next to shelters. Getting people to wash their hands regularly during the pandemic was also challenging due to high illiteracy and cultural barriers.

Short-term funding: Setting up the infrastructure for WASH and changing hygiene behaviour takes time and investment. Yet, a lot of the Rohingya-response funding is short-term. “Short-term funding creates gaps in the responses, and a break in the sustainable interventions”, says BRAC's Farukh Hossain Khan.

Solutions



A Rohingya woman washing hands with soap and water after coming from the toilet

Community water networks and handwashing points: BRAC and other WASH sector partners moved away from shallow tube wells, which are destructive to the aquifers and quickly become contaminated to fight water scarcity. The solution was to pump water to overhead water tanks using deep tube wells instead of shallow hand pumps and then provide water through a pipe network using multiple tap stands. Seventeen such water networks were installed by BRAC in 2020, which helped ensure access to safe water for the Rohingya and host communities affected during the pandemic, and avoided overcrowding at tube wells.

Over 681 handwashing stations were installed in the Rohingya camps in 2020, to improve hygiene during the pandemic.

Pits and landfills: In 2020, 70,150 waste bins were distributed for solid waste management and 24 slaughtering sites were established in the camps. Three faecal sludge management points, 818 latrines, 1,086 bathing cubicles, and 21 women's hygiene centres were installed to improve sanitation and faecal sludge management.

Hygiene behaviour change: Recognising unhygienic behaviour as a major problem, it was crucial to invest heavily in awareness-raising and behaviour change communication in 2020. Approximately 529,000 hygiene kits were distributed, and more than 62,000 hygiene sessions were conducted as part of this effort. More than 681 handwashing stations were constructed to improve handwashing practice in response to COVID-19.

Sayed Monjurul Hoque, Solid Waste Management Specialist at UNDP, said that BRAC's contribution helped the sector continue WASH services during the pandemic.

"BRAC is a crucial partner for solid waste management in the camps," he said. "They extended their activities and deployed additional staff to keep up with project goals during COVID-19."



A row of sanitary toilets in Camp 4, Ukhiya

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