'When Will You Start Teaching the REAL Curriculum?'

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'When will you start teaching the REAL curriculum?'-
Challenges and Innovations in Education for Rohingya Refugees

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Abstract. This paper explores key problems faced by different humanitarian agencies in educating Rohingya refugees from Myanmar seeking asylum in Bangladesh. The first half this research provides an overview of the challenges faced by different refugee communities globally in the Education sector, followed by the relevant ICT interventions. Then, based on our interviews and focus group discussions with Rohingya refugees, we highlight the roadblocks faced by them while accessing education services in their camps. Absence of coherent curriculum, challenges with language, lack of qualified teachers, and non-acceptance of ICTs as primary education tools for children are identified as some of the key challenges faced by Rohingyas. Based on our research, we recommend that enabling policies and an inclusive hybrid knowledge network, emboldened by pre and in-service teacher training, inclusive religious education, standardized curriculum, and tangible employment opportunities can pave the path for a better and an educated future for the persecuted Rohingyas.

Keywords: Education, Refugee, Rohingya, ICT4D.

1   Introduction

For any nation to thrive, educating its people is a necessary key for development. However, if one does not have a medium for education, what can be done to address such challenge? If the only languages one knows are the languages that person is not allowed to learn in, how would it be possible to get an education? This paper explores the problems faced by the different humanitarian agencies in educating the Rohingya refugees seeking asylum in Bangladesh. Originating from Myanmar, Rohingyas are an ethnic minority group of Myanmar, and currently among the most persecuted people in the world. Since August 2017, around 700,000 Rohingyas took refuge in neighboring Bangladesh [1]. In camps where Rohingyas are rebuilding their lives, limited informational and educational services have negatively affected their well-being, dignity and living conditions. Education services are focused on non-formal education of young children and not adults.

In this paper, we highlight the struggles of the Rohingya refugees, especially in the education sector. Over the first half of this research, we provide literature review of similar challenges faced by different refugee communities all around the world and the existing technological interventions, which can provide better understanding about the commonalities and uniqueness of the challenges faced by Rohingyas. Then we fo-

cus on the relevance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in making the education delivery and the learning process easier for the refugees. The second half of the paper covers a brief overview about the Rohingya crisis, followed by a description of our field research activities. Our paper is one of the very first research work that has incorporated the thoughts and aspirations of the Rohingya refugees directly from the field. At the end of this paper, we present a set of recommendations, which we believe can help in developing a relevant, inclusive, and participatory education system for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

2 Displacement of People and Refugee Crisis: The Present Magnitude and Impacts

Since the end of the Second World War, we are witnessing the biggest forceful displacement of humans all over the globe, primarily due to political persecution, ethnic cleansing, armed conflict, socio-economic oppressions, and climate change. Till 2017, around 70 million people have been displaced both internally (within their own countries) and externally (to other countries). Among them, approximately 25 million people are formally recognized as refugees [2]. Amid such huge crisis, one of the most alarming issue is that among these ever increasing stream of displaced people, almost half of them are children, making such population even more vulnerable in the face of known and unforeseen adverse situations. Research shows that on average, refugees are in exile for two decades or more. Hence any quick fix to address major problems for refugees are bound to be unsuccessful [3].

3 Education for Refugees: Significance and Key Challenges

According to UNESCO, large scale internal and cross-border human displacements, can leave millions of people underprepared for the challenges they are facing at present and near future [3]. Dryden and Peterson believe that in addition to the traditional humanitarian supports for refugees, education also needs to be given one of the highest priorities. Their research showed that in the short term, Education can usher in stability to the disrupted lives of the displaced millions [4].

3.1 Learner-centric Challenges in Education for Refugees

There are several challenges that can negatively impact the refugee students, irrespective of their age and demography. These include absence of basic literacy and knowledge about host community's language; Sufferings from severe trauma experienced while escaping the violence; Identity crisis, etc. Miller and Brown observed that refugee students often lack competency in their own language and also struggle to integrate with the host community's education system available for them [5]. This situation further worsens when the textbooks available for the refugees are also not properly customized, addressing their language needs and competency levels [6].

3.2   Organizational Challenges in Education for Refugees

Another set of challenges faced by the refugees while accessing education are related with some of the inherent disconnections within the traditional educational system. A major challenge is the scarcity of trained, prepared, and qualified teachers in refugee-centered communities and camps. It is critical to ensure the psychological wellbeing of any students, especially if they are refugees [7]. Teachers also need to be trained for handling students with diverse education, socio-economic, and language efficiency backgrounds. UNHCR's education strategy highlighted that in order to guarantee a conducive learning environment, the teacher-student ratio in any refugee camp should not be more than 1:40 [8]. The biggest obstacle towards establishing any long-term education initiative for refugees is the need for recognition, standardization, and accreditation. In many instances, the education centers and schools are being built and run on ad hoc style, with a short term goal of engaging school going children within a learning friendly environment. There are usually no education management systems in place to monitor the progress of the students, the performance of the teachers, the status academic performances, etc. [9], and no clear pathways for any refugee on getting higher education or employment (within the host community or outside) using the education she or he are receiving in their respective camps [10,11,12]. According to Gladwell, around the globe, on average, only 1 percent of refugees are enrolled in higher education programs, significantly smaller than the global higher education enrollment average of 34 percent [13].

4   Present Trends of ICT in Education for Refugees

ICT applications for refugee education is relatively a new phenomenon worldwide. Research has showed that in present time, around 86% of the total refugee population in the world live in their host countries from global south. Globally, on average 32% refugee households have a basic mobile phone without any net connectivity [14]. In this section, we document some of the major ICT based initiative in the education services for refugees.

4.1   Learner-centric ICT Solutions

One of the major trends in ICT for refugee education is the diffusion of gamification. For example, the three winning education applications from the noted EduApp4Syria competition: Antura and the Letters, Feed the Monster, and SIMA focused on early childhood literacy issues for Syrian refugees in particular and gained huge popularity among the target audience. UNHCR furthermore found that, in addition to the mobile or online education games, it's also very important to ensure an ample supply of books in the refugee camps. In Tanzanian refugee camps, UNHCR with the partnership of an NGO Worldreader has delivered 30,000 e-books through e-reader devices [15]. The refugees can also have access to this huge digital library using their own mobile phones. There are efforts from different stakeholders to facilitate language learning for refugees without much overheads. Ankommen, a mobile based education

application, developed by the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees, is a one of such initiatives. This language learning app helps with the learning of numbers, counting, spelling of words etc. Gherbtna, MAPS.ME, Alarmphone, InfoAid are some of the other popular ICT applications being designed and used to make the lives of newly arrived refugees relatively easier [16].

4.2 Education Service-centric ICT Solution

Kenya's Teachers for Teachers project offers a mix of offline-online resources: face-to-face training, and in-service support through instant messaging service. In Kenya, this project is training refugees to be educators as well, which is a rare sight in the refugee education domain [17]. The Borderless Higher Education for Refugees initiative in Kenya is another successful ICT project for refugee educators using online-offline combinations. Here, the main teacher training happens in the traditional face-to-face way, but the trainee teachers mostly use online education contents through their tablets as the main learning materials [18]. Monitoring and evaluation of any refugee-centered education initiative is very challenging. Work complexities with multiple stakeholders, conflict of interests, issues with acceptable performance benchmarking, and the volatile situation of the refugee camps have made such work quite difficult. Amid such situations, ICT options like Kmobile Schools gives us hope. It is ICT application designed by FHI 360 which can be used via android smartphones or tablets. This application can collect and analyze critical education related performance indicators from different refugee camps [19].

5 Current Status of Rohingya Refugees

Among the Rohingya refugees taking shelter in Bangladesh, there are over 530,000 children aged 3 to 17 who are in immediate need of Education in Emergency (EiE) services [20, pp. 8]. Only a quarter have access to education and this is restricted for kids up to the age of 14 since secondary education is not available to them. In a joint assessment on EiE, agencies found that for primary aged children (6-14), 57% of girls and 60% of boys have attended learning centers since arriving in Bangladesh [20, pp. 15]. It is estimated that in order to provide 614,000 children and youth education, 5,000 equipped classrooms, skilled teachers are required. Meanwhile about 1,805 teachers and 1,114 education centers are established [21]. Taught in both Burmese and English [20, pp. 7], about 113,761 boys and girls under 14 are given informal education in these learning centers. About 78,285 students have received the education kit [21]. The Education Sector has faced additional challenges due to government restrictions preventing any formal or non-formal education programs being offered to the Rohingyas. On the contrary, Moktobs or Madrassahs (Islamic Education Centers) are running in the camps that are neither recognized by the government or UNHCR. These Madrassahs are significantly better-attended than learning centers, with close to 80% of children age 6-14 attending since arrival, compared to 60% for learning centers and 50% report attending both facilities [20].

5.1 Rohingya Refugees and ICTs

The status of ICT infrastructure within the refugee camp areas is appalling. Mobile voice and data services are very infrequent. There is no ICT based information and communication applications or platform for the refugees. The Rohingyas, without any formal identification documents, are legally barred from purchasing any local SIM cards in Bangladesh. There is no official written form of the Rohingya language, though it is the main form of oral communication. Within the camp area, according to UN, only around 5%-17% refugees have some level of literacy [22]. Discrimination against women and children are rampant when it comes to access and usage of information and communication channels.

6 Research Method

For our research, in addition to the literature review, we collected firsthand information from the Rohingya refugees based in different camps at the border of Myanmar and Bangladesh. In order to have a comprehensive understanding about Rohingya refugees' opinions on access to education and other related information services, we reached out to the refugee population in the UNHCR registered camps and the newly built makeshift camps. Registered camp's respondents came to Bangladesh from Myanmar during the first wave of influx in 1992. In the makeshift camps, all the Rohingyas escaping the military crackdown in August 2017's and 2016 crackdown are taking refuge. In these two different types of camps, we conducted seven focus group discussions (FGD). Among these FGDs, we had three male-only, three female-only, and on mixed group. In total, 54 refugees (25 females and 29 males) took part in FGDs. We conducted three in-depth key informant interviews as well. Our respondents were from a prominent NGO, a community leader in a camp, and an international humanitarian agency. We have recorded all of the responses with full anonymity to ensure the personal privacy and confidentiality of each of the respondents. The entire research work was conducted in the field between May and August of 2018, by one of the authors.

7 Initial Findings

In this section, we have thematically summarized the key issues that frequently came out during all these conversations. Some of these challenges resonate the problems faced by other refugee communities around the world. However, there are certain education issues which are unique to the Rohingya crisis, especially in relation to the politics with choosing the language for education delivery, and the general perception of Rohingya about ICTs as educational tools.

7.1 (Lack of) Access to "REAL" Education

Feedback on the quality of education were taken from both the groups of refugees, the ones who came earlier and the ones came to Bangladesh from August 2017. According to the respondents, the temporary learning centers or TLCs running within their camps are not providing customized content or lessons appropriate for children of different age-group. The study contact hour per group per days is 2 hours, with most of the TLCs holding 3 different sessions for different age groups of children per day. All the TLCs are providing informal education on English, Burmese, and Math at elementary levels. Students within the age bracket of 4 to 10 at the same time in the same classrooms. Hence both groups: the kids with advanced knowledge and the ones with very basic or no basic knowledge get frustrated with the confusing style of the pedagogy. One female respondent from a makeshift refugee camp mentioned that her family became frustrated with the confusing state of affairs in the education service and felt the need to be a bit proactive.

> *My husband went to the "school" (where our children go) here in the camp and asked the teacher- "When will you start teaching the REAL curriculum?"*

According to our respondents, children who were studying in grade 5, 6, 7, or above have no activities or educational curriculum addressed for them. Especially the kids who studied till secondary level in Myanmar would like to continue their study but getting no opportunity. In a women group a participant mentioned,

> *"Our children who studied in school in Myanmar, have forgotten everything here because they do not have those books or resources to learn those topic again."*

7.2 Language Barrier in Education Delivery

For the refugees who came earlier, we found their situation to be even more challenging as far as access to quality education is concerned. Before the latest exodus of Rohingyas in 2017, these people were provided with NGO-managed regular education, where they were learning Bengali and English. They were given text books. Refugees from the first wave of influx could even access secondary and tertiary education. This helped them with better employability outside their camps as well. After August 2017, the Bangladesh Government banned the teaching of Bengali to Rohingyas in order to prevent further demographic assimilations [20, pp. 28]. All the schools were forced to stop providing the language lessons or delivering any lectures in Bengali. Such a decision left thousands of Rohingya children from second wave of influx in a severe uncertain situation. As they were born in Bangladesh and have never been to Myanmar, the primary language for communication and having access to knowledge remained Bengali and not Burmese. At present, these groups' education process is at halt as the related service providers are redesigning the curriculum in Burmese from Bengali. A male respondent of this group shared:

> *At the beginning, Bangla was taught…. that was good. Boys and girls could read the newspapers as they were taught Bangla. Now as Bangla teaching is stopped, we are in big problem.*

Another woman said:

The children who were born and brought up in Bangladesh for a long time. They now have huge difficulties in understanding Burmese lessons. Our children did not even hear Burmese since they were born.

However in the newer camps, all schools are mostly focusing on English and Burmese. They are completely avoiding any Bengali curriculum.

7.3 Teachers' Crisis for the Refugees

Another point of struggle for Rohingya refugees in education is the quality of the teachers. As we have seen in out literature review section, finding quality educators in refugees camps is always very challenging [20, pp. 6]. One of our key informants who has been working with Rohingya education for last several years mentioned:

Two types of teachers are present. One is from host community and another one is from Rohingya.

According to our respondents, it is always challenging to find Rohingyas with higher level of education interested to be a part of the TLCs on a regular basis. On top, there is a consistent need to pre and in-service pedagogical training for all the TLC teachers, which in many cases are not provided on a regular basis, due to scarcity of time, or fund, or both. Another interesting trend we have observed in the field is the growing practice of Rohingya youths with higher level of education to be offering private tuition (in exchange of payments) to the younger Rohingyas, mostly the ones who are not being able to learn enough from the generic and informal education contents offered in the TLCs.

7.4 Gender (In)equality in Access to Education

The gender dimension plays an important role when it comes to access to education for Rohingya refugees. For all the Rohingyas, irrespective of the period when they fled Myanmar, access to education for girls was a challenge back home. As most of the state-run schools teach girls and boys together, Rohingya girls were required to be in the same space with local ethnic majority students. According to many respondents, that close proximity with local majority or Rakhaine population resulted in mental and physical harassments, racial attacks, and overt discrimination from the school authorities as well. And Rohingya girls were particularly targeted in most of those incidents. One female respondent shared:

(Rohingya) Girls didn't want to go to school because the Mong (Rakhaine) boys and girls used to create issues, used to quarrel, fight with them. There was no justice for them.

In the refugee camps, many of the girls stop going to school within the camps after reaching puberty, hence hindering the diffusion strategies for basic education among young Rohingyas.

7.5 Aspiration for Higher Education

Amid all the challenges, it was quite evident that the Rohingya population value education very highly, especially for their younger generations. Among the refugees who arrived earlier, many were allowed (during pre-August 2017 period) to go to the local schools in Bangladesh. Some were even able to pursue tertiary education using fake Bangladeshi Citizen IDs and related information. One male respondent recalled:

After NGO schooling, if someone can manage Bangladeshi id card/birth certificate, they can send their children to study further till college.

The newly arrived Rohingyas are hopeful about getting good education which can help them to better survive and thrive. This type of optimism has been prevalent among most of our conversations with the refugees. One male respondent mentioned:

It will be useful for the future if they get chance to go for higher studies in the universities step by step, or else only primary idea will be of no help. However, they are still happy by getting it.

7.6 Popularity of Religious Education

Religious education has always played a critical role in the daily life of Rohingyas, both in Myanmar and in the refugee camps in Bangladesh. In Myanmar, where Rohingyas were systematically discriminated from basic citizens' rights to education, the religious education was their one consistent lifeline to preliminary literacy. During our field research, we have observed an ad-hoc network of makeshift mosques around all kinds of camps. Each of these mosques also function as Moktobs (informal religious schools) for the refugees living in the vicinity. Young girls and boys usually go to these places very early in the morning and in the late afternoon to get lessons on Quran and some basic Arabic, mostly managed and led by the local Imams or religious leaders. We have observed that some of these informal religious schools are also offering informal lessons of Burmese, English, and basic Math for the Rohingya children. In majority of such mosques, Imams are giving the lessons voluntarily without any payment or monetary transactions. We have also found a few of the areas, where the refugees raised money among themselves to pay the Imams for these extra Burmese, English, Math, and Arabic lessons. The other reason religious education gained popularity is the sudden exclusion of Bengali from the lessons plans (for the earlier refugees), which created a certain level of mistrust between the Bangladesh Government and the Rohingyas.

7.7 (No) ICT for Education

According to our data analyses, overwhelming majority of the respondents mentioned that they have easy access to mobile phones for communicating with each other even after the existing government restrictions on this issue. However, almost all the respondents expressed similarly that mobile phones and the corresponding online applications (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, etc.) or any mobile phone based pro-

grams should not be used for educating their children as standalone options. One male respondent, who arrived after August 2017, said:

We aren't interested to give children mobile phones for education because they can't operate. Also because mobile phones require charges, battery runs out. Mobile cannot be used for a longer period.

Another female respondent stressed on the demerits of top-down, non-interactive educational technologies:

Videos or any visual aid can only enhance knowledge at a certain level. If someone doesn't know the basic any visual aid can't be used as a substitute of classroom education for him. Because visual aids or videos are not interactive, our children can't ask question.

There were also opinions on using ICT based education solutions for kids in higher classes. According to a Rohingya male respondents:

The little children would not understand lessons through video or cannot relate. If the elder ones read that'd be good.

At one hand, it has been evident that Rohingyas have been reluctant about solely relying on ICTs for education delivery for their younger generations. On the other hand, many respondents, especially the women have expressed their interest in getting audio-visual, informational, and instructional materials that address practical health (i.e., menstrual practices, reproductive health, maternal care, birth control) or energy (i.e., best energy usage practices, alternative fuel sources, environmental pollution, etc.) related topics.

8   Discussion and Recommendations

In the following, we propose a set of recommendations to ensure a better performing, inclusive, and relevant education service for the Rohingyas, which would help them to get "REAL Education".

8.1   Enabling Policies

Continuous engagement with the Government of Bangladesh is critical to expand the humanitarian space for learning; achieve greater policy clarity in line with the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which holds state parties responsible for educating the children in their jurisdiction regardless of their immigration status. Also, the access to SIM cards for Rohingyas need to be legalized at the earliest, so that they would not need to ensure such access through black market transactions. Legal and easier access to mobile phone network and high speed internet services can undoubtedly assist the diffusion of ICT-assisted interventions in education and other development domains.

8.2 Standardization and Reorganization of the Existing Education Service

The current education services within the Rohingya refugee camps need to be re-designed at the earliest. The common classrooms catering all the children within the age-group of 4 to 14 years are primarily helping the kids to be off the streets. But such education centers are not being able to offer customized and need based educations for the kids in need. The adolescent population are beyond the scopes for the present education plan implemented by the responsible humanitarian service providers. Audio-visual tools can be used to develop learning modules on different applied topics (i.e. Fake News, Mensural Health, Family Planning, Violence against Women, etc.), as mentioned by many respondents of our field interviews. Aside from that, ICT-aided monitoring and evaluation of the existing education or learning centers in all the refugee camps needs to be done urgently, based on certain learning goals and standardized benchmarks.

8.3 Pre and In-service Teacher Training

There needs to be mechanisms in place for providing a set of standardized pre and in-service teacher training for all the educators involved in such missions. A significant part of such training (especially the in-service part), can be done online or through offline, self-paced learning modules, to be disseminated via tablets or mobile phones. Humanitarian service providers can pull resources together to develop a set of master learning modules in Rohingya, Burmese, Bengali, and English languages, which can be used for these pre and in-service training purposes, delivered by a joint group of Rohingya and local master trainers.

8.4 Employment and Entrepreneurship

Hence employment opportunities for the TLC or refugee school graduates, even starting with some basic jobs, need to be available for the Rohingyas. Such opportunities can involve humanitarian services within the camps, and also online based, skill-specific opening for which one does not need to be physically present for delivering the work outputs. ICT-aided education can help the existing educational efforts to offer appropriate trainings. Rohingya refugees from different age-group can be eventually trained in certain ICT skillsets (i.e. coding, digital animation, debugging, web development, etc.) and then be guided to make their professional competencies for hire in different online market places.

8.5 Inclusive Religious Education

The immense social acceptability and popularity of religious education system and the Imams (religious preachers) among the Rohingya refugees need to be utilized effectively while designing inclusive and participatory education system for this population. The voluntary works of the Imams related to teaching the Rohingya kids Arabic, English, and Burmese need to be recognized. Interested Imams can be provided pre

and in-service pedagogical training in synchronization with the other educators of the regular learning centers in the camps. A common set of learning goals based informal curriculum can be proposed to be followed by both: the religious schools and the learning centers to make the education service more efficient within the refugee camps.

8.6   Hybrid Knowledge Network

The challenges stemmed out of poor internet and mobile network connectivity can be solved with some policy interventions. However, that can take some time to be fully addressed. In the meantime, ad hoc intranet based solutions can be established between the field level headquarters of the humanitarian agencies and the different types of learning centers. Such connectivity can at least help the mobile based education platforms to be functional and synchronized within a certain geographical area, thus helping in providing real time support in pedagogy, training, monitoring, and evaluation of the numerous education initiatives. The locally available community radio networks also need to be taken into confidence to co-design and co-develop audio programs addressing major socio-economic and rights based issues relevant for the refugee population.

9   Conclusion

Based on our literature reviews and field-level research, we can conclude that education is certainly not a standalone sector in any refugee crisis. In order to ensure an inclusive, sustainable, and quality education for the marginalized refugees, the related stakeholders should treat refugee education as a long term developmental service instead of a short term humanitarian crisis point. As reflected in our concluding recommendations, we envision ICT solutions to be integrated in a cross-cutting manner, transcending over traditional service and stakeholder related boundaries.

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