HUMANITARIAN SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE DIGNITY AND WELLBEING FOR ROHINGYA REFUGEES IN BANGLADESH

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Cover Image: Sisters play a traditional game with their uncle outside their home in a camp for Rohingya Refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, July 2018. Credit: Jonathan Hyams / Save the Children.

ABSTRACT

There are almost 1 million Rohingya refugees currently living in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The vast majority of these people are confined to government-run camps—they live in deplorable conditions, are unable to legally work or leave the camps, and are entirely supported by international aid. The Rohingya suffer from a distinct lack of access to durable solutions, in that safe return to Myanmar is not possible and the prospects of local integration or resettlement to a third country are extremely limited. While ending refugee crises invariably requires long-term political solutions, this article will argue that where repeated efforts to pressure Myanmar to address its human rights abuses and create the conditions for safe and voluntary repatriation have proven ineffective, more attention should be paid to shorter-term humanitarian solutions. Potential interim strategies designed to increase self-sufficiency, dignity and wellbeing will be assessed with a view to developing a holistic strategy that can provide short- and medium-term support, while a longer-term political solution to what is one of world's most severe humanitarian crises is sought.

Introduction

The Rohingya have been fleeing persecution by the Myanmar government and military, otherwise known as the Tatmadaw, for decades. In what has become a desperate situation, these people are currently confined to encampment with no realistic prospects of voluntary repatriation, integration or resettlement. Efforts on the part of the international community dating back as far as the 1980s to pressure Myanmar to address its lamentable human rights record have failed time and time again, and human rights abuses persist today despite political change and the arrival of so-called democratic government in 2015. After briefly outlining the Rohingya's lack of access to durable solutions and highlighting the limited prospects of Myanmar accepting their return while respecting their human rights in the near future, this paper will analyse strategies proposed and/or implemented in three other camp settings (Thailand, Ethiopia and Uganda) before presenting a tailored solution for the Rohingya context. The solution will involve a range of short- and medium-term initiatives designed to increase self-reliance through livelihood opportunities, access to land and the easing of restrictions on work and movement. Such interventions are critical to the survival of the Rohingya where longer-term political discussions have essentially stalled.

Mass exoduses from Rakhine State in Myanmar across the border to neighbouring Bangladesh occurred in 1978, 1991–1992, 1996–1997, 2012 and, most recently, 2017–2018. While each exodus has been significant in number, the one commencing in August 2017 was by far the greatest; almost 720,000 stateless Rohingya women, men and children fled highly organised attacks by the Tatmadaw involving beatings, rape and murder, in what has been described as "a textbook example of ethnic cleaning" (Al Hussein in Beyrer & Kamarulzaman 2017, p. 1571). There are 32 camps in Cox's Bazar in which some 930,000 Rohingya reside. Two camps were formed following the 1991–1992 influx, now home to around 50,000 people, while the remaining camps were formed following the 2017–2018 influx. The fact that camps dating back almost 30 years are still in existence today indicates the likely future of those recently formed.

According to Bangladesh law, the Rohingya are not allowed to leave their specific camp or engage in work, with the exception of 'cash-based interventions' through which humanitarian agencies are permitted to employ Rohingya on an hourly basis to perform manual tasks inside the camps. Other than this cash-for-work program, the Rohingya are entirely dependent on humanitarian assistance to address the most basic needs, such as food, water, shelter and health services. These provisions aim to save lives, reduce suffering and maintain dignity, and are provided by a range of United Nations and non-government organisations funded by national governments from around the world. There is ample coverage of the deplorable conditions in which the Rohingya live within the camps—of particular note are alarming health conditions (Ahmed et al 2018); poor water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) standards (Hsan et al 2019) and limited education (Prodip 2017, and Chan,

Chiu & Chan 2017). The dire situation is compounded by the fact that the Rohingya cannot leave the camps (at the time of writing, the Bangladesh Army was erecting a fence around the perimeter of all camps), nor do they have access to information via the internet due to a government ban.

Despite the urgency of the situation, access to any of the three internationally recognised durable solutions—voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement—is years away, at best. 'Durable solutions' are solutions that enable refugees to secure the political, legal and social conditions necessary to maintain life, livelihood and dignity (Danish Refugee Council 2020). While clearly the preferred option of Bangladesh and indeed the international community, as evidenced by the two repatriation agreements signed between Bangladesh and Myanmar since 2017, safe repatriation to Myanmar is simply not possible. The Myanmar government has failed to improve the living conditions of the 120,000 Rohingya who have remained confined to Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps in Rakhine State since 2012 (Beyrer & Kamarulzaman 2017), much less address the lack of legal status of the Rohingya by granting citizenship and ensuring equal rights to the other peoples of Myanmar (Kipgen 2019). Only a fundamental shift in law and policy by the Myanmar government and the Tatmadaw could bring about the conditions for return and stop the repeated forced displacement that has defined the Rohingya's existence since the 1970s (Brinham 2017 and Tran 1996). The challenge, therefore, is how to address the disconnect between the need for structural solutions, which may be years, even decades, away, and the limitations of humanitarian assistance, which can only provide the bare minimum of support.

Local integration of nearly 1 million Rohingya is a highly unlikely option in a country where 25% of the population lives below the poverty line (Asian Development Bank 2016), a stance made very clear by government at all levels in Bangladesh. In an already unstable political environment, the potential range of challenges that local integration would pose to the local economy, political system, environment and society in general (Al Imran & Mian 2014; Alam 2018, Brinham 2017; and Tran 1996) presents too great a risk for the Bangladesh government to entertain. Additionally, continued encampment allows the government to show its 'humanitarian' side (by permitting refuge in Bangladesh) while playing to people's sense of nationalism (by limiting such refuge to camps in order to protect Bangladeshi citizens' interests). Finally, the third durable solution, resettlement, is afforded much less attention because it is both legally impossible and contrary to the prevailing populist sentiment seen in many parts of the world (Juan-Torres 2017). While the Bangladesh government refuses to recognise the Rohingya as refugees and support their resettlement to avoid creating a 'pull-factor' from Myanmar (Bhatia et al 2018 and Rashid 2019), the reality is that, given the insular policies of the United States, Europe and other influential countries, resettlement of such a large caseload would likely take decades were it even possible (Rashid 2019).

This precarious situation begs the question of where to go from here in terms of advancing the Rohingya's prospects of achieving a durable solution. Various options are presented in the existing literature, which can be broken down into two categories: general strategies applicable to any refugee context; and those relating specifically to the Rohingya in Bangladesh. As this paper will show, however, these strategies have proved thoroughly ineffective to date due to Myanmar's resolute disregard for the rights of the Rohingya. Rather than persisting with ineffective policies, it is submitted that short-term solutions designed to increase refugees' self-reliance must be assessed with a view to establishing strategies that will improve the Rohingya's wellbeing, as long-term solutions remain out of reach. In line with UNHCR's guidance that "enabling refugees to become self-reliant pending the realization of an appropriate long-term solution is an important first step towards achieving any of the three durable solutions" (UNHCR 2011, p. 186), this paper will assess the applicability of interventions used in other contexts in the Rohingya camps and conclude with a tailored-solution for the Rohingya context considering both long- and short-term solutions.

Strategies presented in the existing literature

Non-context specific strategies

There is considerable discussion around the role of the international community in bringing about the conditions to create durable solutions in general, without applicability to any specific refugee crisis. Various authors have analysed refugee crises across the globe and produced recommendations designed to tackle the issues. As will be shown, their applicability to the Rohingya crises and, therefore, their effectiveness, is highly questionable.

Cristiani (2015), Morgan (2002) and Loescher & Milner (2003) all strongly advocate for the need for external assistance in one form or another. Cristiani focuses on the need for international involvement in the form of international relations and foreign policy to resolve refugee crises, while Morgan looks more specifically at external assistance through peace enforcement and nation-building. Loescher & Milner note the importance of states actively engaging in capacity-building in the countries from which refugees flee and reconsidering how the external elements of their policies may be utilised to respond to crises in a more comprehensive fashion. More specifically, they assert the importance of the European Union (EU) and its member states and other countries making concerted efforts to directly address the human rights abuses that cause refugees to flee and seek refuge in the first place. While strategies such as these no doubt have merit as general approaches, without more specific, contextualised details, the failure of these very forms of external assistance to have any impact on the policies of the Myanmar government to date (described in more detail below) casts serious doubt on their applicability to the Rohingya crisis.

Solutions specific to the Rohingya context

A significant body of academic literature is dedicated to solutions specific to the Rohingya crisis. These solutions can broadly be categorised as follows:

1. International pressure on Myanmar to change their policies towards the Rohingya.

2. Increased burden-sharing on the part of third countries in terms of resettlement and financial support to Bangladesh.

3. Increased self-reliance on the part of the Rohingya to better equip them for what will most likely be their new life in Bangladesh.

As in the case of the more general solutions outlined above, it is evident that the first two lack applicability on the current political environment. The third solution, however, has promise but requires much deeper examination.

Collective pressure, whether through treaties, joint action or otherwise, to pressure Myanmar into resolving the Rohingya issue are widely proposed. Al Imran & Mian (2014) argue that Bangladesh should enter into bilateral or multilateral treaties to garner the support needed to resolve the crisis, as well as engage the international community in general to pressure Myanmar to take the lead in resolving the problem, while Brinham (2017) talks of a "joined-up effort to secure durable solutions". Suaedy & Hafiz (2015) take a different approach in examining the decades-long struggle of the Rohingya to gain citizenship in Myanmar, noting that "stronger international and ASEAN involvement is needed to change the Myanmar government policy of discrimination against minorities, particularly the Rohingya" (p. 57). The fundamental flaw in this collective pressure approach, however, is the fact that the international community, led predominantly by the United States (US) and the EU–itself a collection of sovereign countries–have been attempting to pressure the Myanmar government to address their deplorable human rights policies for decades. The continued persecution of the Rohingya, among other minority groups, in the face of these efforts is strong evidence that these policies have failed.

Ever since the violent suppression and killing of thousands of citizens who demonstrated against the ruling government in 1988, the US has taken a raft of measures to pressure the government of Myanmar (previously Burma) to stop the violation of internationally recognised human rights. Ewing Chow (2007) provides a detailed account of these measures, some of which include revoking Myanmar's benefits under the Generalized System of Preferences; non-renewal of bilateral textile agreements; prohibiting any new assistance to Myanmar, including prohibiting US citizens both in the US and in Myanmar from making new investments in Myanmar; and barring any expansion of existing trade commitments. In 2003, the US banned the importation of any goods produced in Myanmar, froze assets in the US held by government officials and

banned visas to the US for the same individuals, and committed to blocking any application by Myanmar for loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. In addition, the US State Department has released reports accusing the Myanmar government of serious human rights abuses. Meanwhile, measures taken by the EU since 1996 involve suspending all defence cooperation and non-humanitarian bilateral aid, and extending and strengthening existing sanctions such as an arms embargo, visa bans, the revocation of benefits under the Generalized System of Preferences, asset freezes and bans on the export of equipment to Myanmar. While some of these sanctions were lifted following the transition of power to the National League for Democracy (NLD) in 2015, a range of sanctions nonetheless continue today. Finally, examples of multilateral pressure include multiple UN-led enquiries into human rights abuses and a resolution by the International Labour Organization ending technical cooperation with Myanmar and barring Myanmar from meetings.

The Myanmar government's ongoing gross mistreatment of the Rohingya and other minority groups since the sanctions, resolutions and other collective efforts since 1988 shows their futility. Military offensives and violence by law enforcement against the Rohingya have seen repeated mass exodus from Rakhine State to Bangladesh, including 250,000 people in 1992–1992, 10,000 in 1996 and 7000 in 1997. The movements were so great that in 2012 Bangladesh closed the border to thousands of fleeing Rohingya, though in August 2017 it had no choice to reopen them when some 700,000 people stormed the border to escape what has since been called a genocide. This is in addition to the 600,000 Rohingya that remain in Rakhine State, 120,000 of whom are restricted to squalid IDP camps under the control of the Myanmar Army and surviving only on aid. Sadly, the Rohingya are not the only persecuted minority from Myanmar. There remain almost 100,000 predominantly Karen and Karenni refugees in camps located along the Thai–Myanmar border who fled government offensives in the eastern states of Myanmar over the past three decades. With refugees lining its borders to both the east and west, the blatant ineffectiveness of the collective international pressure on Myanmar to change its ways is palpable, casting great doubt over suggestions to do the same in the current context when Myanmar's position has not changed. While this clearly does not mean that the use of collective pressure should be abandoned entirely, it does show that the likelihood of producing any significant results in the short term is minimal, and that other strategies must be given more attention.

Increased burden-sharing on the part of third countries is a critical part of any refugee response, as recently recognised through the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR 1996). Rashid (2019), Gorlick (2019) and Beyer & Kamarulzaman (2017) all highlight the importance of third countries supporting Bangladesh through humanitarian assistance and/or resettlement. Nevertheless, in judging what impact they might have, one must look closer at the current situation when it comes to the two key aspects of burden-sharing: resettlement to third countries and financial support to Bangladesh. As a matter of policy, resettlement to third countries is currently restricted by the Bangladesh government in an attempt to avoid the creation of a 'pull factor', which would encourage the remaining 600,000 Rohingya located across the border in Rakhine State to cross the border in the hope of resettlement (UNHCR in Rashid 2019). Further, even if Bangladesh did allow resettlement to take place, the number of refugees accepted would be insignificant compared to the Rohingya population in Bangladesh, given the current resettlement policies of the main recipient countries (the US, Canada and Australia). As Rashid (p. 9) notes, "In the wake of the influence of right-wing political forces in Europe and Australia and the retreat of the US–a traditional refugee resettlement state–from admitting migrants and refugees, third-country resettlement of Rohingyas has a bleak future." With respect to financial contributions to Bangladesh as the host country, as with any protracted refugee situation (despite being less than three years since the most recent influx), donor fatigue has already set in, with total funding falling significantly from US$827 million in 2019 to just US$198 million during the first five months of 2020 (UNOCHA 2020). The politics of aid can be cruel and the Rohingya crisis has all but disappeared from the media, giving way to crises in the Middle East, such as in Syria and Yemen, which have a direct impact on key states such as the US and Europe. Like collective pressure, it is argued that when burden-sharing is viewed in the context of the current political environment its applicability and effectiveness are called into question.

The third solution, increasing the self-reliance of the Rohingya, is a far more practical solution. Under the current context, it can be applied with a reasonable chance of successfully bringing about results in improving the wellbeing of the Rohingya. Self-reliance refers to "developing and strengthening livelihoods of persons of concern, and reducing their vulnerability and long-term reliance on humanitarian/external assistance" (UNHCR 2005, p. 1). Though criticised by Easton-Calabria & Omata (2018) as driven by donors looking for low-cost strategies to withdraw support from protracted refugee crises, self-reliance has wide support. Bhatia (2018), Gorlick (2019) and Rashid (2019) all make mention of the need for greater support for the Rohingya while they remain in Bangladesh: Bhatia and Gorlick both note the importance of short-term measures designed to increase access to work and education, while Rashid mentions the importance of enhancing capacities and reducing refugees' reliance on aid (though without offering any detailed analysis). While without doubt the most productive of the three approaches, nowhere in the existing literature is this explored in depth, with reference to specific strategies that may guide the policies and programs of governments, the UN and aid agencies. It is argued that it is the most appropriate strategy in a context where the alternative is perpetual dependency on aid with no access to durable solutions; further examination is required into this critical area.

Humanitarian solutions to improve dignity and wellbeing for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

Strategies adopted in other refugee contexts

Thailand

Decades of military offensives against the minority ethnic groups of southeastern Myanmar have seen over 150,000 people take refuge across the border in Thailand. While the most intense fighting took place during between 1980 and 2005, and despite the fact that Myanmar has seen political changes and the beginning of quasi-civilian rule since 2011, almost 100,000 refugees remain on the Thai side of the border. This case study is of particular relevance as not only does it involve the same source country, government and military (Myanmar), but refugees in both Thailand and Bangladesh suffer from the same heavy government-imposed restrictions to movement outside the camps and obtaining legal work.

Maynard & Suter (2009) provide a detailed overview of the main strategies used to enhance self-reliance in the Thai camps, involving support to produce handicrafts, deliver income-generation training, facilitate access to markets, and provide human rights education. Due to government restrictions, the handicrafts produced, which include traditional clothing, blankets and wall hangings, were previously only sold within the camps; however, following advocacy by NGOs to the Royal Thai Government, the products are now sold outside the camps. This increased access to markets represents a significant advancement in the ability of the camp residents to become self-reliant.

Specific aspects of income-generation training include increasing profitability, accessing markets and developing marketing strategies. Alongside income-generation training, other livelihood strategies include vocational and micro-enterprise training, funding for micro-enterprise equipment, resources and repair management, self-managed savings schemes, and collaboration with local villagers in product development and marketing channels (Maynard & Suter, ibid). Notably, Maynard & Suter (p. 145) argue that providing human rights training on key issues, such as the right to work and fair pay, also proved effective "in building social capital and networks to circumvent barriers and build capacity to achieve social and economic self-reliance".

Given the fact that the refugees in Thailand and Bangladesh suffer from the same restrictions on work and movement, these strategies are highly relevant to the Cox's Bazar context. The provision of materials, tools and machines as required to support the production of handicrafts for sale within the camps would provide an important source of income for those with the relevant skills, while training could also be provided to others in parallel to ensure equal opportunities for all. In particular, the production of clothing, paintings, decorations and wall hangings would be of use given the existing skills of Rohingya women and girls, who particularly suffer from a lack of access to livelihood opportunities due to cultural norms that do not allow them to leave their homes during the day. Income-generation training, including how to maximize earnings

power, would also be very useful as Rohingya have very limited access to markets, though the low literacy rate would need to be taken into consideration when designing the program. An excellent livelihood would be repairs to basic items such as solar lights, which are provided to all households by humanitarian agencies yet frequently break. Finally, the application of a rights-based approach, as employed in the Thai camps, through which knowledge and practices around human rights can be taught, is of the utmost importance for the Rohingya. Considering their status as stateless refugees and given the fact that the concept of human rights has been denied to them from birth, education on relevant human rights frameworks, including international human rights instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights–and, more specifically, their relevance to the Rohingya–would be of huge benefit in forming a basis for advocacy for improved conditions, either directly or through other stakeholders, as well as promoting solidarity among the refugee community. Note, however, that this would need to be done in a context-specific way: for the Rohingya, who have arguably enjoyed none of the basic human rights during their lifetime, it may be difficult to understand the relevance of these rights or how they can be of service to them as people who are more concerned with survival.

Ethiopia

The arrival of Eritrean refugees to Ethiopia commenced during the Ethiopian–Eritrean War (1998–2000) and has continued since, largely due to the Eritrean government policy of military conscription. In 2019, 70,129 new asylum seekers from Eritrea sought refuge in Ethiopia, and, by the end of 2019, the registered population in the Tigray and Afar area stood at 139,281 persons (UNHCR 2019). The vast majority of these people live in camps dependent on aid, while a very small number have benefited from an 'out-of-camp scheme' through which Eritreans are permitted to live outside the camps if they are able to support themselves. As previously mentioned, the Rohingya are not permitted to leave the camps in Cox's Bazar at this stage, therefore, the latter option is not analysed in this paper.

Like the Rohingya and the Myanmar refugees in Thailand, encampment with very limited access to durable solutions has led to a very low level of self-reliance in the camps and livelihood interventions are the most appropriate response (Samuel Hall Consulting 2014). Key initiatives outlined by Samuel Hall Consulting (ibid) that are designed to increase access to livelihoods include nine-month-long vocational training in electronics and electricity, metal work, construction, food preparation, furniture making and tailoring/garment making. While this has increased knowledge of necessary vocational skills, life skills, literacy and numeracy among the refugees, Samuel Hall Consulting notes that three months after completing the training, the number of graduates with jobs was not as high as had been expected. Samuel Hall Consulting recommends a follow-up program including an apprenticeship, local and regional trade fairs, innovative credit mechanisms and self-help groups to support micro-entrepreneurship.

As discussed above, vocational training is an excellent strategy that would allow the Rohingya to learn skills that could be applied to generate income and develop self-reliance. However, critical to the success of such a program is a demand for the skills taught, which may not be present in the camps at Cox's Bazar. Household and community shelters are not connected to mains electricity and most households only have one portable solar light with no household solar lighting system. This means that almost no households have the power to run anything more than a simple radio, mobile phone or torch/lamp, therefore, training in electronics and electricity should be limited to information specific to these devices. Construction training is certainly useful, as in a camp with 200,000 households and thousands of community structures to support them there is always repair and construction work, creating strong demand for specific skills that would increase both employability and salary received. Metal work, however, would be of very limited use at present—the Bangladesh government has banned the use of metal given its permanent nature and the perception it would create among the host community.

Apprenticeship programs have the advantage of providing hands-on experience using skills taught in training, and the many international and local agencies working in the camps could create such opportunities within their existing programs. Strictly speaking, these would need to be unpaid apprenticeships due to the restriction on work; however, agencies could circumvent this by hiring the Rohingya as skilled cash-for-work (that is, paid more than unskilled labourers), which the government has allowed to date so long as the Rohingya are hired on an hourly basis. This highlights a need for advocacy to allow the Rohingya to be hired as staff, which would allow them to enjoy better work conditions and greater job security. This might be achieved through a special arrangement to allow work initially within the camps with a view to expanding to work outside the camps at a later time. Similarly, barriers to leaving the camp mean that trade fairs could only be conducted within the camp. Very interesting to note, however, is the shift by the Thai government to allow the sale of refugee-produced handicrafts in markets outside the camps along the Thai border. Donors and implementing aid agencies could use this precedent as the basis for advocacy to pressure the Bangladesh government to do the same for the Rohingya, arguing that increased access to specific markets, such as the nearby Kutupalong, Balukhali and Shamlapur markets, results in increased self-reliance of the Rohingya without negatively impacting host community livelihoods (Weftshop in Maynard & Suter 2009).

Samuel Hall Consulting (op cit) highlights the possible use of credit mechanisms, but notes: "micro-finance credit mechanisms require relatively stable environments to mitigate the risks, a condition that is not fulfilled in the Ethiopian camps where the fluidity of movements would make the mechanism unsustainable" (p. 49). While the extremely limited movements in and out of the camps at Cox's Bazar create the ideal environment in terms of population stability, the Bangladesh government to date has banned the use of exclusive cash programming on a large scale, instead preferring in-kind and/or voucher-based programming (again due to the political issues involved in providing cash to refugees). Another issue is that the Rohingya do not officially have access to markets outside of the camps, and humanitarian agencies should not be seen to encourage refugees to attempt to leave the camps to procure materials and tools. Any micro-credit scheme would therefore need to operate without cash, perhaps with a points system that could be used to purchase goods and services within the camp. Samuel Hall Consulting also notes the role of diaspora in supporting credit mechanisms; however, the relatively small number of Rohingya diaspora would likely limit this. Notwithstanding, the Rohingya who have been resettled to countries such as the US, Canada, Australia, Ireland and the UK could both provide funds and lobby their respective governments to support these, and indeed other, schemes.

Uganda

Uganda is host to some 1.4 million refugees, the vast majority of whom are from South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (UNHCR 2020). While Uganda has hosted refugees since as early as the 1950s, those currently taking refuge in Uganda are predominantly there as a result of the civil war in South Sudan that has raged since 2013. Uganda's liberal refugee policy has been praised by the international community as a "model for Africa" (UNHCR in Schiltz et al 2009). Uganda follows a non-encampment policy via its Settlement Transformative Agenda, and legislation allows refugees freedom of movement and the right to work, to establish a business, to own property and access national services, including primary and secondary education. 92% of refugees live in settlements located alongside host communities in which they are provided with a plot of land to be used for housing and agricultural purposes (UNHCR, 2019). A key aspect of Uganda's approach is that refugees are integrated into the National Development Plan, which ensures that refugees are formally part of the development agenda of Uganda (see Uganda United Nations Country Team and the World Bank, 2017, in their discussion of the Ugandan Refugee and Host Population Empowerment [ReHOPE] Strategic Framework).

Despite being far more flexible than the refugee policies of Bangladesh, Thailand or Ethiopia, the Ugandan system has received strong criticism. Schiltz et al (2019) and Kaiser (2006) both highlight the insufficient resources provided to refugees living in settlements for them to become self-reliant, while Kaiser goes on to describe how the remoteness of the settlements results in infertile soil and poor access to markets, communication and transport systems. Further, while officially enjoying freedom of movement, refugees are usually still required to obtain administrative permits to leave and return to their designated settlements (World Bank 2016); in any case, they are effectively restricted to their settlements due to the lack of support afforded to them in urban areas, where they fall outside the

scope of Uganda's formal refugee policies and become 'invisible' (Hovil 2018). Finally, the merits of the Ugandan policy must be considered in light of the various motives at play. Hovil (ibid, p. 3) perhaps best makes the point: "Uganda's progressive refugee policies have been shaped and adopted as part of a broader strategy of engagement with the international community that has sought to boost Uganda's reputation and guarantee that its government has access to much needed external development and humanitarian aid." While this should not necessarily detract from the policy, it does warrant a deeper analysis into its effectiveness and the relative returns enjoyed by the various stakeholders, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Criticism notwithstanding, there are clear benefits to the Ugandan refugee policy, which should be seen as an example of a possible alternative for the Bangladesh government. It is accepted that the granting of unrestricted freedom of movement and the right to work and own property is not possible for the foreseeable future due to the political implications (which is also unsurprising given that Uganda did not enact the relevant legislation until some 50 years after the first refugees arrived); however, settlements divided into plots of land and allocated to Rohingya households, within which they could move freely, is arguably a very reasonable approach under the circumstances, especially considering the relative similarities between the two contexts. The refugee caseloads in Bangladesh and Uganda are similar at around 1 million; a significant majority of land in both countries is rural; and the refugee and host communities in the rural areas of both countries share the same skills, religion and even language (in parts of eastern Bangladesh). In fact, the Rohingya were living in conditions very similar to this before fleeing Myanmar, the critical difference being that in Bangladesh they would not be subjected to arbitrary detention, forced labour and other human rights abuses by the Tatmadaw. Though some activists would argue that the Rohingya should enjoy full freedom of movement, a pragmatic approach designed to provide short-term solutions must involve concessions; the reality is that convincing the Bangladesh government to even allow *relative* freedom of movement is not an easy task. Given the highly politicised nature of the Rohingya issue in Bangladesh, rejecting the government's constraints and calling for larger-scale reform will almost certainly be met with resistance, possibly even ending the conversation. While ultimately a question of morality, in a context where refugees are enduring immense physical and psychological suffering on a daily basis, there is a strong argument that doing so would be counter-productive to the core priority in this particular moment: the achievement of interim shorter-term humanitarian solutions necessary to alleviate such hardship.

A key challenge, however, is the political risk involved with the perceived integration of the refugee population into Bangladeshi society. As noted by Kaiser (op cit), without freedom of movement from the settlements, refugees cannot survive as they cannot access the markets necessary to fully capitalise on produce grown on their plots. The challenge then is how to provide the Rohingya with access to those markets without granting unrestricted movement rights. One potential solution would be to establish settlements in areas where there are already well-functioning markets—for example, for every 50 plots at least one functioning local market will be accessible to both host and refugee community members. This set-up would support the creation of the conditions to build self-reliance while avoiding actual or perceived integration by ensuring that refugees could not move beyond their settlement without permission. Worthy of note is that, at the time of writing, the Bangladesh government is developing land on an island off the coast of Bangladesh to relocate approximately 100,000 refugees (see Banerjee 2020 for further details). While no movement has taken place yet, it does prove that the relocation of refugees to other areas of the country where they could move around freely is a realistic option. Finally, by integrating refugee support into the overall development program of Bangladesh, as was done through the Ugandan ReHOPE Strategic Framework, such support is likely to be seen as part of a larger development program that will benefit the host community, rather than a purely humanitarian initiative that will exclusively benefit the refugees.

Key to any such strategy is advocacy for the relaxation of restrictions on movements. Samuel Hall Consulting (op cit) and Maynard & Suter (op cit) emphasise the importance of engaging with local authorities at various levels to stress the mutual benefits of allowing greater access to markets, whether they be for labour, goods or services. There is also extensive academic literature on the benefits of allowing the integration of refugee communities into host communities (World Bank 2017; Assad 2018; Betts et al 2014; and Fallah et al 2018). While the sheer number of Rohingya would present challenges, advocacy for at least partial access to local markets (possibly in the form of a set-up described above) is strongly recommended, based on the success of similar Thai and Ugandan policies.

A tailored solution for the Rohingya in Bangladesh

The current discussion is focused on the role of the international community in pressuring Myanmar to create the conditions for safe repatriation, which is misdirected. It does not consider the repeated failed attempts of the West to influence Myanmar during the previous four decades and the fact that such attempts continue to have limited prospects of success today. While these efforts should continue through different means to produce better results, policy makers should also shift their attention to short-term humanitarian solutions designed to bring about improved conditions for the Rohingya while longer-term political solutions are sought. An examination of case studies in Thailand, Ethiopia and Uganda reveals a number of possible strategies. At a minimum, interventions to increase livelihood opportunities should be supported, including vocational training, apprenticeships and micro-credit schemes. These should be complemented by advocacy

to increase access to markets and trade fairs, as well as engagement of the Rohingya diaspora to provide financial and political support. Strategies such as these will provide the skills, knowledge and basic inputs to empower refugees to generate income and provide for themselves.

Only so much can be done within the limits of the camps, however, and these initiatives should be seen as a bare minimum to maintain dignity and wellbeing. In the medium-term, the international community should work with the Bangladesh government to shift the current heavily restrictive refugee policy towards allowing access to land, relative freedom of movement and the integration of refugee support into Bangladesh's overall national development strategy through a system such as the Ugandan Settlement Transformation Agenda. Formally permitting the use of land for agricultural or other purposes, providing support to start up production on that land, and ensuring access to nearby markets will not only provide the Rohingya with the means to become self-sufficient, it will stimulate the local economy. In doing so, this will generate significant benefits for the nearby host community and overall development of Bangladesh. These measures are critical to protecting the Rohingya's basic human rights while longer-term political solutions are sought, which will one day hopefully allow the Rohingya to safely return to their homes in Myanmar.

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