

Research Report

UGC-JSPS Joint Research Project: FY – 2022

**Dynamics of Refugee-Host Relationship: Toward a Sustainable
Living Condition in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh**

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Submitted to

University Grants Commission of Bangladesh

April 2024

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Summary

This research delves into the intricacies of the refugee-host relationship in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, with a paramount focus on establishing sustainable living conditions. It begins by examining the compelling factors that forced Rohingyas to flee Myanmar, followed by a comprehensive assessment of their current situation in Bangladesh. Empirical insights from the ethnographic study conducted between 2022 and 2023 reveal that the sizable refugee population significantly impacts the daily lives of the host communities, leading to tensions that hinder social cohesion. While the collaborative efforts of international organizations, local governments, and public representatives are highlighted as crucial in fostering peaceful coexistence between the two communities, the study also identifies specific actors, such as Rohingya terrorist groups, affluent hosts, some NGOs and their personnel, and other vested interest groups, contributing to the perpetuation of conflicts and tensions.

The study argues that the potential for sustainable living condition between Rohingya and host community hinges on a complex interplay of factors, including the repercussions of the refugee influx and preexisting conflicts in Cox's Bazar, the primary areas accommodating refugees (particularly, in Ukhia and Teknaf). Moreover, the host communities express apprehension regarding the perceived preferential treatment of Rohingyas by humanitarian organizations and the scarcity of job opportunities. The research emphasizes the importance of adopting a pragmatic approach and strategic framing to cultivate social cohesion, while also recognizing the role of humanitarian aid and external influences. It advocates for policies and initiatives that engage both communities, along with concrete measures for Rohingya's repatriation, to alleviate the strain on local resources and the environment, thereby comforting the host communities.

1. Introduction

The global forced migration crisis has led to a significant rise in refugee numbers. In late 2017, particularly following the August 25 campaign, a humanitarian crisis unfolded as Rohingyas were forced to flee en masse (approximately 730,000), seeking refuge in neighboring Bangladesh for survival. As of September 2023, there are 965,467 registered Rohingyas in 33 makeshift camps, including two registered refugee camps in Ukhiya and Teknaf Upazilas of Cox's Bazar district. Over 90% fled persecution in Myanmar's Rakhine State in August 2017, with around 100,000 born in camps since (UNHCR, 2020), nearly doubling the local Bangladeshi population. This demographic shift reflects the current living conditions in refugee-hosting areas (particularly, in Ukhiya and Teknaf), emphasizing the need to address the conflict-ridden relationship between Rohingyas and the host community.

International organizations have provided life-saving aid to these displaced Rohingyas as a humanitarian response. Due to restricted work permits and movement, Rohingyas depend on this aid for sustenance, causing distress and raising concerns among locals about aid distribution. Initially tolerable relations have soured due to the impact of the large refugee population on all aspects of the local community's life. While life-saving assistance can lead to local discontent without equitable treatment, social cohesion can be fostered through inclusive programs for both communities, promoting trust and leveraging local resources. Historical connections and social resources can be utilized to promote social unity through interactive initiatives like training sessions and community gatherings.

The major findings are structured as follows. Firstly, the study emphasizes the conflict situation that has emerged with the host communities in Cox's Bazar as a direct consequence of the Rohingya influx. Additionally, it sheds light on the profound impact of this influx on the host society, unveiling the significant changes that have transpired in Rohingya-host relations, including the intricate roles played by religion and ethnicity. Furthermore, the study delves into the tensions arising between the "new" and "old" Rohingyas residing in Cox's Bazar, delineating the stark differences in their experiences, particularly concerning those who arrived before and after the 2017 persecutions. This exploration underscores the palpable strain on relationships within the host communities.

The research also examines the potential opportunities presented by the refugee influx for fostering peaceful coexistence between Rohingyas and host communities. It identifies actionable steps to address and resolve the underlying conflicts, as well as discerns the key factors that contribute to either championing or spoiling efforts for peaceful coexistence. Moreover, the study highlights the pivotal role that media can play in facilitating peaceful coexistence by shaping narratives, disseminating accurate information, and promoting understanding and empathy between communities. Before concluding, a comprehensive working framework is developed for promoting and sustaining peaceful coexistence between the Rohingya and local communities in Cox's Bazar. This framework integrates key insights and recommendations garnered from the study's findings, offering a roadmap for stakeholders and policymakers to navigate the complexities of refugee-host relations and advance initiatives for harmonious living.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

As a social phenomenon social cohesion is old, yet contemporary. Its necessity and prevalence have increased with the development of the settlement of many nations and ethnic groups in modern-day societies. In recent times, with the increased population movement through migration and displacement, as a response to conflict and prerequisite for peaceful coexistence, social cohesion is being furnished to a different level. It is already recognized as an inevitable process for coexistence across the continents. Nevertheless, no single definition of this much-discussed phenomenon has become universal yet. It is often considered a quasi-concept, because of its varying definitions and implementation policies due to distinct discipline, context, or issue (Green, Janmaat, & Han, 2009). It is also used to mean social relations, the cooperation and solidarity between groups and individuals living in a society and the interrelationship with broader economic, social and political outcomes (Babajanian, 2012).

Among the widely recognized definitions the great sociologist, Emile Durkheim's thought is still relevant. He defined social cohesion as a characteristic of society that shows the interdependence in between individuals of that society and coins to social cohesion: (i) the absence of latent social conflict (any conflict based on wealth, ethnicity, race, and gender, etc.) and (ii) the presence of strong social bonds (e.g., civic society, responsive democracy, and impartial law enforcement) (Durkheim, 1897). As found realistically, social cohesion is not unidirectional but interactive. Policy implications and the measurement of cohesion depend on how the concept is defined. As Beauvais and Jenson (2002) pointed out, each element could be linked or freestanding, with each having different implications. As they defined, "social cohesion or a socially cohesive society as one where all groups have a sense of "belonging, participation, inclusion, recognition and legitimacy". They see social cohesion as one thread with a socially cohesive society.

While there is no conflict in the basic definition of social cohesion (i.e., absence of conflict), there is scope and breadth in its application across the countries based on local dynamics. At present, the level of social cohesion varies in most countries due to diverse refugee situations. Because it has to do with community relations and the laws of the country concerned, international refugee policies, and rights and obligations. However, as a humanitarian problem, the refugee-hosting countries are determined to maintain cohesion in the light of their own socio-cultural and politico-economic perspectives. In light of the abovementioned thoughts, we define social cohesion this way: 'social relations and tolerance among the Rohingya and host community in view of each other's conditions (e.g., sufferings, deprivation, needs, rights) for peaceful coexistence, despite differences between them'.

Social cohesion, essential for peaceful coexistence, has gained prominence in contemporary societies due to increased population movements caused by migration and conflict-driven displacement. However, defining this complex phenomenon universally remains challenging, as it encompasses diverse social connections, collaboration, and unity among individuals within a society, intertwined with broader economic, social, and political factors. Emile Durkheim's (1897) enduring definitions emphasize interconnectedness among individuals, absence of social conflicts, and strong social bonds like civic engagement and responsive governance (Beauvais and Jenson, 2002). Social cohesion's operationalization varies based on local dynamics, particularly in diverse refugee contexts, linking community relations, legal frameworks, and humanitarian commitments. In the context of Rohingya refugees and the host community, fostering social relations and tolerance is crucial for peaceful coexistence despite inherent differences.

Robert Chambers' (1986) extensive investigation into the relationship between refugees and host communities revealed nuanced aspects of their dynamic. Host communities are profoundly affected by refugee camps under specific circumstances, a concern heightened by the escalating global population of forcibly displaced individuals. The challenge of ensuring the safety and peaceful integration of Rohingya refugees into host societies has become increasingly complex, especially as the refugee situation prolongs. The exclusive provision of humanitarian aid to refugees, coupled with the adverse impacts of refugee camps on the local population, has strained the relationship between the two groups. This strain mirrors similar challenges observed in the Kakuma host community in Kenya (Chambers, 1986), as well as in studies by Alix-Garcia and Saah in 2009.

Chambers' analysis highlighted the differentiated impacts of refugee situations on various segments of the host community (1986). Affluent and middle-class hosts, engaged in business or trade, often benefit from the presence of refugees and related programs. In contrast, impoverished hosts face challenges such as competition for resources, employment, wages, amenities, and communal assets. These dynamics are salient in the context of the Rohingya settlement in Ukhiya and Teknaf. The consequences of any refugee situation are multifaceted globally—favorable for some individuals and detrimental for others. These outcomes hinge on factors like refugee numbers, duration of the situation, rapport with host communities, and strain on local livelihoods. Despite potential benefits, public perceptions and negative attitudes can dampen positive impacts, a trend frequently observed in the Rohingya situation where negative effects predominate.

The pathway to achieving social cohesion hinges on how the refugee situation in the region is leveraged, leading to either positive or negative impacts. While the predominant narrative often highlights the negative aspects, there are notable instances of positive outcomes and valuable insights emerging from these circumstances. Chambers (1986) noted that the presence of refugees and the establishment of camps had positive ripple effects on the lives of locals, such as the development of educational institutions and healthcare services within the host community. Similarly, Jacobsen (2002) argued that the economic repercussions of refugee movements do not invariably harm the host community; in fact, the influx of refugees can bring potential economic benefits to the hosting communities. From Jacobsen's perspective, refugees can act as economic catalysts for the host community, fostering mutual coexistence and strengthening relations.

Building upon Jacobsen's framework, Alex Garcia and Saah (2009) endorsed the idea that the presence of refugees correlates positively with increased trade activity in host societies. This discovery of new market opportunities not only generates economic prospects for local residents through trade but also fosters interaction and peaceful coexistence between refugees and the host community. The insights gleaned from these perspectives underscore the potential to capitalize on opportunities arising from the Rohingya situation to promote social cohesion and harmonious relations.

3. Research objectives and methods

This study aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis to explore the current dynamics, conflicting issues, and potential avenues for enhancing social cohesion between Rohingya refugees and the host community. The primary research inquiry is: how can existing relationships be incentivized to promote peaceful coexistence between these communities? To address this question, the study has focused on several key aspects. Firstly, it delves into the underlying reasons for tension between the Rohingya and host communities. Secondly, it considers suitable approaches and opportunities for promoting social cohesion and peacebuilding, taking into account specific contextual factors and interests. Thirdly, it identifies significant individuals or groups that either facilitate or hinder social cohesion in the refugee-hosting environment. Lastly, it develops a strategic framework to analyze the ongoing situation and propose strategies to address the identified issues.

This ethnographic study, conducted between 2022 and 2023, combines primary data collection with secondary sources such as scientific articles, research reports, and news articles to provide a nuanced understanding of the social cohesion dynamics in the Rohingya refugee context. It utilizes qualitative data gathered from 45 Rohingya refugees in seven refugee camps and 25 Bangladeshi host communities in Cox's Bazar (Ukhiya and Teknaf). A number of camps (1E, 4, 12, 24, 25, Nayapara and Kutupalong) were selected to encompass both established and newly emerging gateways for migrants entering Bangladesh. These include traditional sites like Kutupalong and Nayapara, as well as emerging sites like Balukhali and Burma Para, offering insights into experiences of both newly arrived and previously settled refugees, along with host community reactions. Data collection involved purposive sampling and qualitative anthropological techniques, including in-depth interviews (n=45), key informant interviews (n=7), and focus group discussions (n=7). Observation was integral throughout. Study sites comprised seven refugee camps and five unions, ensuring comprehensive representation of perspectives from Rohingyas, host communities, NGO representatives, and government officials. Participants encompassed pre-2017 and post-2017 Rohingya migrants, along with diverse host community members, maintaining systematic considerations of gender, age, occupation, and other relevant categories.

4. Rohingya influx in Bangladesh

The Rohingya influx in Bangladesh, particularly in Cox's Bazar, presents a multifaceted challenge that demands careful consideration of sustainable living conditions for both refugees and host communities. Originating from Myanmar due to compelling factors, the Rohingya's situation in Bangladesh is a subject of comprehensive assessment, revealing significant impacts on the daily lives of locals and fostering tensions that hinder social cohesion. While collaborative efforts involving international organizations, local governments, and public representatives are acknowledged as pivotal in fostering peaceful coexistence, the study identifies various factors contributing to conflicts and tensions. It emphasizes that sustainable living conditions hinge on addressing the interplay of factors including the refugee influx, preexisting conflicts, and concerns regarding job opportunities and perceived preferential treatment. To cultivate social cohesion, the study advocates for pragmatic approaches, strategic framing, and inclusive policies engaging both communities, alongside measures for repatriation to alleviate strain on local resources and comfort the host communities.

4.1 Rohingya influx and tension in host societies

The Rohingya's nearly forty-year presence in Bangladesh necessitates comprehensive analysis considering factors like their place of residence, local environment, education levels, age distribution, professional standing, relationship with the host community, residency duration, and living proximity. The impact of the Rohingya influx in Ukhiya and Teknaf, Cox's Bazar, spans diverse domains. One critical area is demographic imbalance, with the Rohingya population outnumbering the host community significantly, leading to feelings of marginalization among locals and confinement among Rohingya within camps. Aid distribution disparities exacerbate tensions, destabilizing local markets and excluding many host community members from assistance. Economic repercussions include limited job opportunities for poor hosts, rising essential costs, and education disruptions, raising concerns about Rohingya youth's future. Environmental degradation, security issues, health risks, cultural erosion, and strained social cohesion further complicate these dynamics.

The overwhelming Rohingya presence has fueled internal disputes and security concerns within camps, straining law enforcement capabilities. Crowded, fragile living conditions breed anxiety and health risks, with locals fearing potential health crises like AIDS. Access to healthcare remains challenging for Rohingyas, exacerbated by mistreatment from health providers. Migrant influence has also weakened local norms, family ties, and cultural practices. NGO culture and confined camp spaces pose additional threats to Rohingya culture and family structures, accentuating the complexity of their integration into host societies.

4.2 Rohingya-host relationship

Initially, the relationship between Rohingyas and host communities in Ukhiya and Teknaf was characterized by compassion and support from most hosts toward Rohingyas upon their arrival. However, over time, the atmosphere became less welcoming and somewhat antagonistic, particularly from mid-2018 onwards. In 2017, a considerable number of respondents expressed support for sheltering Rohingyas, but by December 2023, only a small minority held a positive stance.

A comparative analysis revealed differing perspectives based on proximity to the camps. Host communities within camps expressed greater grievances than those farther away. Before the camps were established, residents had already faced land deprivation and challenges in community interactions due to the camp's presence. Rohingyas receiving visible aid within sight of insider hosts led to growing irritation among them. Some Rohingyas mentioned that locals initially facilitated Rohingya ID card creation within the camp, which brought satisfaction at the time. However, once stricter security verifications were enforced, envy among hosts increased as they lost control over aid distribution.

Interestingly, the relationship between hosts and Rohingyas appears more cohesive in Teknaf than in Ukhiya. Long-term coexistence in Teknaf, compared to the population surge in Ukhiya since late 2017, might explain this difference. Prior to the surge, rapport between Rohingyas and locals was relatively positive. Interactions, including unofficial intermarriages, travel, socializing during religious events, and joint play among children, were more common, although both communities agree that these interactions have declined over time.

Typically, interactions between the two communities are limited to business or labor-related activities. Rohingya purchasers gather vegetables and accessories from older hosts in Kutupalong camp, while some Rohingyas engage in daily labor in host communities, and vice versa. During focus group discussions, hosts in Ukhiya expressed concerns about Rohingyas' lack of acknowledgment for initial assistance and perceived them as a threat to their livelihoods. However, opinions varied, with some hosts acknowledging polite behavior from Rohingyas but noting underlying tensions.

NGOs and government officials also play a role in shaping community relations. Initially optimistic about short-term Rohingyas' stay, hosts provided shelter, hoping to benefit from their possessions. However, perceptions shifted negatively as differences in lifestyles and behaviors emerged, leading many hosts to refuse further accommodation for Rohingyas. These complexities highlight the evolving nature of the relationship between Rohingyas and host communities, influenced by factors like proximity to camps, historical interactions, economic interactions, and changing perceptions over time.

4.3 Religion and ethnic identity

The displacement of Rohingyas from Rakhine is primarily driven by their Islamic faith and ethnic identity as Muslims, Rohingya or Bengali. There is a prevailing belief that religious and ethnic ties played a role in providing shelter to Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar. Our study focused on the perspectives of various groups in Bangladesh, including Bengali Muslims, Bengali non-Muslims (Buddhists), and non-Bengali individuals (Chakmas), regarding this issue. Bengali Muslims, while aware of the Rohingyas' religious affiliation, express mixed sentiments. Many are repelled by the behavior and lifestyle of Rohingyas, citing illicit activities like drug trafficking, prostitution, and violence that don't align with Islamic principles. Some host communities within Kutupalong camp are extremely angry and suggest urgent eviction or even aerial bombardment. Approximately half of the host participants believe Rohingyas should return to Myanmar promptly.

Non-Muslim Hindus and Buddhists are generally less critical but also desire Rohingya repatriation. Some advocate for granting Rohingyas certain rights to prevent potential harm, while others acknowledge the economic benefits brought by their presence. For instance, a Buddhist driver in Ukhiya notes the positive impact on his income due to increased demand for transportation services. On the other hand, Chakma individuals in Teknaf have minimal conflicts with Rohingyas and engage in collaborative agricultural activities. They did not report major issues except occasional incidents of fruit theft from their orchards by Rohingyas working in nearby hills for employment. Overall, the Chakmas maintain a peaceful coexistence with Rohingyas due to their geographic distance from the camps and lack of significant conflicts of interest.

4.4 New-Old Rohingya relations

The evolving dynamics of relationships among Rohingya communities and their host communities highlight a distinction between the Old Rohingyas (pre-2017 arrivals) and the New Rohingyas (post-2017 arrivals). This shift in relations is attributed to differing perspectives within the Rohingya population itself. Old Rohingyas lament that their once-amicable rapport with locals has deteriorated due to the influx of New Rohingyas. Conversely, New Rohingyas argue that Old Rohingyas benefit from aid and support while sidelining newcomers. This internal conflict has escalated to the point where Old Rohingyas perceive the presence of New Rohingyas as a direct threat to their identity and security.

In the Kutupalong registered camp, about 16,714 Rohingyas (2712 families) reside, with 549 families opting out of receiving assistance, particularly from organizations like UNHCR or the Bangladeshi government. These families fear losing their registered status, believing it would label them as newcomers subject to deportation. Despite their refusal of aid, observations reveal some families discreetly accepting relief supplies. Investigation uncovers that these self-sustaining individuals often have family members employed abroad, primarily in the Middle East, sending remittances back home. This complex interplay of identity, assistance, and self-reliance underscores the intricate dynamics within the Rohingya community itself.

5. Route to social cohesion

The route to sustainable living conditions in Cox's Bazar, amidst the Rohingya influx is complex and multifaceted, as revealed by this comprehensive research. By delving into the refugee-host relationship and examining the factors prompting Rohingya to flee Myanmar, the study underscores the pressing need for sustainable solutions. Empirical insights highlight the significant impact of the refugee population on host communities, leading to tensions that impede social cohesion. While collaborative efforts involving international organizations, local governments, and public representatives are deemed essential, the study also identifies various factors contributing to conflicts, including Rohingya terrorist groups and affluent hosts. Central to achieving sustainable living conditions is addressing the interplay of factors such as the refugee influx, existing conflicts, and concerns over job opportunities and perceived preferential treatment. The research underscores the importance of pragmatic approaches, strategic framing, and inclusive policies that engage both communities, alongside concrete measures for Rohingya repatriation. By alleviating strain on local resources and fostering social cohesion, these initiatives aim to create a more sustainable environment for all residents of Cox's Bazar.

5.1 Opportunities from influx

The presence of protected refugees brings both negative and positive impacts on the host community. With the increasing number of Rohingya refugees, a variety of businesses, transportation services, and other facilities have emerged near the camps, creating diverse employment opportunities and business ventures for the local population. Some hosts in Ukhiya also acknowledge that the arrival and settlement of Rohingyas have opened up specific opportunities for them. The influx has notably improved healthcare access for the local population. The healthcare services currently available in various health centers were unimaginable before 2017. "Prior to the surge in 2017, we did not have access to complimentary medical care, but now we receive high-quality healthcare services from NGOs-operated health centers."

Moreover, a considerable number of individuals with higher education qualifications have secured employment at various NGOs following the surge. Local residents are also benefiting indirectly from the presence of Rohingya people and their activities. The Rohingya community engages in commercial activities within the camps, establishing marketplaces in host societies. They purchase goods from local vendors and then distribute and sell them both within and outside the refugee camps. Landowners can also hire Rohingya workers at reduced wages. Many Rohingyas believe that their arrival has brought about positive effects on the local economy, facilitated by the presence of people and donors in Ukhiya and Teknaf. Some individuals who receive food assistance may choose to sell surplus or non-essential items (that they don't use) to local markets, where residents can purchase these items at a lower cost. Such items include soap, toothpaste, towels, and combs. While they save on food expenses and generate income from selling items and working outside the camps, they also invest in transportation and establish businesses inside and outside the camps, contributing to the local economy.

Local hosts also note that a significant number of local residents have found employment opportunities in camps due to the Rohingya influx. Conversely, Rohingyas express that the assistance they receive is insufficient for sustaining their livelihoods, highlighting the need for more employment opportunities beyond their current circumstances. They emphasize the importance of providing their children with quality education and skill development training to improve their prospects for success in any future location. Effective collaboration between Rohingya and the host community in leveraging the opportunities created by the influx can lead to mutual benefits and foster harmonious coexistence in the region. For instance, if Rohingyas teach Burmese language and locals provide instruction in Math and English at educational facilities in camps, this exchange can promote equilibrium and harmonious coexistence. Informal education following this system has already commenced in several camps. Additionally, the Ukhia-Teknaf region has gained global recognition as a significant area hosting refugees. Some hosts believe that Cox's Bazar has become an important region due to the refugee situation, attracting substantial domestic and international assistance. This creates opportunities for future development programs, holding great potential for the prosperity of the entire coastal belt.

5.2 Conflict mitigation

The host communities' resentment partly stems from the exclusive focus on providing humanitarian aid to the Rohingya, exacerbating the significant issue of the majority-minority dichotomy where the local population is outnumbered by Rohingya refugees. Residents of the Kutupalong camp in Ukhia express primary concern over the majority-minority issue. With approximately one million Rohingyas in the densely populated Ukhia-Teknaf Upazilas, outnumbering local Bangladeshis two to one, some locals propose relocating Rohingyas to various districts as a resolution. However, certain host participants in Lambasia have no conflicts with the Rohingya. Any issues that arise are typically resolved amicably by the Camp in Charge (CIC), Rohingya leaders (*Majhis*), and local representatives. Conversely, Lambasia and Piyokpara hosts have experienced varying degrees of tension with Rohingyas, as reported by residents in those areas. Some locals believe that allowing Rohingyas to leave camps, or providing aid to host communities, would alleviate tensions.

Addressing the language barrier is seen as vital to minimize misunderstandings between Rohingyas and Bangladeshi hosts. Proficiency in Bengali by both groups is recommended, although some Rohingyas feel it's unnecessary, preferring Burmese and English. Hosts fear Bengali education could lead to assimilation, while others see it as enhancing interactions and respect. Recent acts of terrorism and killings within the camps are recognized as significant issues in Ukhia and Teknaf. Host communities suggest implementing stricter measures to suppress terrorists and internal disputes among Rohingyas (New vs. Old factions). Diminishing the power of Rohingya groups and reducing their population could lead to harmonious coexistence. However, concentration of Rohingyas in Ukhia-Teknaf has degraded the environment, causing resentment among hosts who view Rohingyas as polluting the region.

Despite perceived lack of freedom of movement, Rohingyas in Camp 1E have found collaboration with authorities helpful in addressing camp issues. However, Camp 24 in Teknaf faces challenges, including sexual assault allegations and rising terrorism. Relocation to Bhasan Char, though

proposed, is met with reluctance by Rohingyas due to detachment from their current setting and family ties in Ukhiya and Teknaf. Bangladeshis on the island also express no desire to be there alone.

5.3 Coexistence and cohesion

Regarding coexistence, the majority of host participants express their unwillingness to continue tolerating the presence of Rohingyas, primarily due to perceived preferential treatment and support given to Rohingyas at the expense of local resources. However, they believe that coexistence remains possible if the government and NGOs provide ample opportunities for all. A Bangladeshi school teacher emphasizes the need for support for local residents as well: "If aid agencies can sustain one million Rohingyas, why can't they do the same for half a million Bangladeshis? Ensuring support for both communities is crucial for social cohesion." Many locals share this sentiment, emphasizing the importance of equitable assistance for all affected populations.

Rohingyas often interact with host community members when visiting local markets (Bazars) or mosques, primarily engaging with male individuals. However, the majority of hosts express aversion to such interactions and are cautious about their children associating with Rohingyas, citing potential negative impacts. While some hosts have minimal interaction with Rohingyas, others advocate for clear segregation in various aspects of life, such as movement, education, and work, to prevent conflicts. Immediate repatriation of the majority of Rohingyas is seen as a solution to alleviate tensions.

There are noticeable differences in attitudes toward coexistence and social cohesion between Old and New Rohingyas. Elderly Rohingyas express a desire for integration but face challenges due to new arrivals. New Rohingyas, on the other hand, feel that Old Rohingyas are not receptive to positive relationships with the host community and expect government relocation to Arakan with Bangladeshi citizenship. Despite challenges, some hosts and Rohingyas believe that addressing conflicting issues and maintaining separate living patterns can foster peaceful coexistence. Recognizing and bridging cultural differences, such as attire symbolism, can contribute to better understanding and harmony. Both groups stress the importance of government and donor support to achieve lasting social cohesion.

5.4 Champions and spoilers

The involvement of various actors within the Rohingya host communities and the communities hosting the refugees is crucial for fostering social cohesion. Local teachers, community leaders, and government officials, such as UNO (*Upazila Nirbahi Kormokorta*), are seen as champions of social cohesion by the majority of hosts. Some local representatives enjoy significant popularity and propose that the army should take a leading role in security forces, displaying greater accountability and vigilance. However, affluent hosts are often viewed as hindrances to peaceful coexistence due to their preference for Rohingya workers who accept lower wages. Additionally, many hosts perceive certain NGOs as maintaining conflict or tensions to sustain their programs in the area. They fear unemployment if the Rohingyas are repatriated or relocated, or if tensions are reduced. Non-political youth and religious figures are seen as potential advocates by the local community. However, some

individuals like local political leaders, journalists, and terrorists are recognized as spoilers to social cohesion, with both Rohingyas and locals viewing Rohingya terrorists as significant obstacles to peaceful cohabitation. Some host communities strongly oppose coexistence and prefer the Rohingyas to leave promptly.

Despite objections to Majhis and volunteers from some quarters, Rohingyas believe they understand their needs and can play a constructive role as champions. Religious leaders and educated Rohingyas are also seen as key figures. International organizations and the CIC office are reported to be making maximum efforts on their behalf. Drug traffickers, certain Rohingya factions like Al Yakin and the Munna group, and local authorities involved in illicit activities, including drug trade, are identified as obstacles to social cohesion. Both communities agree that the government's benevolence will have the most influential and beneficial impact on social cohesion. Positive gestures from the government can encourage peaceful coexistence. International organizations can also serve as advocates by involving the host community in their assistance and development initiatives, contributing positively to social cohesion efforts.

5.5 News and social media

The news media has predominantly centered its attention on the influx of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh, particularly following the substantial surge in numbers that began in 2017. This media coverage has played a pivotal role in eliciting empathy for the Rohingyas who faced forced displacement, and it has also influenced the attitudes of Bangladeshis towards them. The news media wields a distinctive power in shaping societal perspectives, which can yield either positive or negative effects. Newspapers have consistently published compassionate stories detailing the plight of the Rohingyas, evoking widespread sympathy across the nation. Since 2017, Rohingya camps have been featured regularly in local and national newspapers, as well as on social media platforms, with a primary focus on the daily struggles of the Rohingya populace.

However, local and national newspapers have also frequently published negative narratives about the Rohingyas, contributing to a pervasive negative perception of this community throughout the country. Nevertheless, according to certain journalists, they adhere strictly to disseminating objective information about factual events. Some hosts have noted that newspapers selectively choose which news to publish. However, the predominant focus remains on highlighting the challenges faced by the Rohingyas, often overshadowing the hardships endured by the local population. Nonetheless, there is a consensus among many that the media plays a pivotal role in fostering peaceful coexistence and social cohesion between the Rohingya and host communities.

5.6 Operational framework

The research aims to construct an operational framework for analyzing conflict transformation and devising strategies to reduce it, given the absence of comprehensive research and a practical framework for promoting social cohesion. The Rohingya refugee crisis has profoundly affected the Cox's Bazar region, with an estimated one million Rohingyas (comprising both old and new arrivals) residing in 33 separate camps. This influx since 2017 has had a significant impact on the socio-

cultural, economic, and political landscapes, notably affecting the lives of the half-million-strong host communities in Ukhiya and Teknaf. Over the past four years, the Bangladesh government has been actively working to repatriate a large portion of these Rohingya refugees, also known as FDMN (Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals). To mitigate potential conflicts amid ongoing repatriation negotiations and peace talks, fostering social cohesion between the Rohingya and host communities becomes imperative.

The overall situation has been deteriorating steadily, leading to increasing daily security concerns. The emergence and fierce confrontations among Rohingya insurgent factions, specifically the Al Yakeen and Munna groups, have stirred up turmoil in the region. Furthermore, the local government is grappling with the challenge of drug trafficking, exacerbating the anxiety and perpetual fear felt by villagers due to the heightened presence of numerous police and military personnel. Despite socio-cultural, religious, and linguistic similarities shared between the Rohingya and the local people of the Ukhia-Teknaf area, some locals harbor negative attitudes towards the Rohingyas. They point out issues such as perceived uncleanliness, aggression, and offensive language among Rohingyas. While religious similarities exist, the differences often outweigh these similarities, leading to tensions.

Despite apparent similarities between these communities, such as shared religious and linguistic elements, achieving social cohesion is a complex endeavor. Through in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions in both communities, it becomes clear that attaining social cohesion necessitates identifying and addressing the contributing factors for peaceful coexistence. This, in turn, will contribute to building a more unified society.

To promote social unity effectively, it is crucial to address three significant issues before formulating a robust and sustainable policy. Firstly, understanding the social and historical linkages between the communities is essential. Second, identifying and addressing the underlying causes of tension that escalate into conflicts is paramount. Third, leveraging facilitators to manage and resolve these tensions effectively is crucial. Building a social connection among communities by exploring shared historical facts and commonalities from the past can enhance understanding and foster a social bridge promoting cohesion. Both sides of the Bangladesh-Burma border, historically referred to as Bengali and Rohingya, share a common historical background. Before the nations gained independence, movements of people, marital ties, and religious bonds were prevalent, indicating a longstanding connection. Linguistically, they also share similarities, with Cox's Bazar district in Bangladesh previously considered part of Arakan, hosting numerous Rohingya or Burmese establishments. Despite the border division, socio-religious and linguistic similarities persist to a certain extent, binding the two communities.

The study identified several factors that contribute to tension and potential conflicts between Rohingyas and host communities. Unequal and inadequate distribution of humanitarian aid, disproportionate allocation of accommodation facilities, loss of cultivable land, and economic strain on the host community due to job market competition are key contributors. Moreover, the influx has strained the education system, leading to safety concerns and increased traffic congestion, impacting

both Rohingyas and local residents. Addressing these multifaceted challenges is crucial for fostering social cohesion and peaceful coexistence in the region.

Both the government and NGOs provide assistance and resources to maintain a certain standard of living for both refugees and impoverished host communities. However, the host communities assert their right to greater support from the government, given their citizenship status and limited access to resources compared to the Rohingya. Many programs are specifically targeted at the Rohingya, causing some resentment among the local community, which feels further disadvantaged due to the sudden increase in different ethnic groups impacting their economic conditions.

Apart from the Rohingyas and the local population, various settlements in Cox's Bazar also have concerns regarding the Rohingya influx, their lives in the camps, and the repatriation process. While the Rohingya situation negatively impacts many locals, it also benefits some local landowners and businessmen directly. The involvement of both local and foreign NGOs significantly influences the situation, with some entrepreneurs in Cox's Bazar benefiting financially from these circumstances. The current challenges stem from structural limitations, with deficiencies in amenities hindering prompt resolution of the issues. The living conditions of Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar are similarly dire compared to the local population. The influx of refugees poses a new challenge for the Bangladesh government, which was unprepared for such a situation. While not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Bangladesh considers humanitarian grounds for accepting refugees, although ensuring full rights for Rohingyas remains a challenge. International organizations like the World Food Programme have been providing assistance to Rohingyas since the early 1990s, but their efforts face limitations and challenges.

To address the prevailing apprehension and unease between the two communities, fostering social cohesion is crucial. Ethnicity plays a pivotal role in promoting unity between Rohingyas and Bengalis in Cox's Bazar. Both communities have a long history of coexistence and shared experiences, especially during significant historical events like the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. Religion also serves as a unifying factor, bringing people together during religious ceremonies and rituals. Cultural similarities further strengthen connections, with shared language, customs, and dietary preferences facilitating interpersonal communication and mutual understanding. The presence of cultural similarities suggests a common ground for building bridges and promoting social cohesion between Rohingyas and Bangladeshi hosts. Establishing social cohesion is essential for stability, economic growth, improved livelihoods, reduced crime rates, a healthier environment, and enhanced collaboration between refugees and local residents. Therefore, efforts to foster social cohesion are imperative for facilitating peaceful coexistence until repatriation occurs, improving the quality of life for both communities.

6. Conclusion

Social cohesion or peaceful coexistence is an outcome achieved through a series of continuous efforts. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of relevant procedures, including the identification of tensions, their root causes, and effective mitigation strategies, is crucial for its attainment. Social cohesion is often associated with post-conflict scenarios or prolonged refugee presence within a society, as seen in Cox's Bazar. Based on the study findings, a majority of host participants perceive the long-term presence of a large Rohingya population as a threat to their livelihoods and regional security. However, experiences vary depending on geographic location, such as Ukhiya and Teknaf, and the proximity of camps to host communities. Generally, residents of Teknaf feel less threatened compared to those in Ukhiya. Bengali Muslim hosts also express more unease compared to non-Bengali and non-Muslim hosts like Chakma, Bengali Hindu, and Buddhist communities. Impoverished residents in both areas are troubled by affluent or middle-class individuals who either lease land to Rohingyas or exploit them for commercial gain. There are concerns about Rohingyas being mobilized by terrorist organizations, requiring Bangladesh to assess potential risks promptly.

Despite this, certain stakeholders such as NGOs, middle-income hosts with rental properties and land, and business individuals prefer maintaining the status quo and discourage relocation or repatriation. While equality, shared values, and quality of life are fundamental to social cohesion, empirical evidence should guide analysis and action. Concrete steps are needed to impact people's lives directly and foster social cohesion effectively. Collective welfare must be prioritized for both communities, refugees, and hosts, emphasizing a holistic and flexible approach considering local impacts. Constructive engagement opportunities between communities are vital for fostering social cohesion, aligning with local society, culture, and legal frameworks. Inclusive programs that prioritize equal attention and support for both Rohingya and host communities can mitigate tensions and promote tolerance and resilience in the long term. Spontaneity and active involvement from both communities are essential, utilizing existing networks and social structures for sustained engagement. Capacity-building initiatives are crucial for sustainable efforts towards social cohesion and independent mutual interactions, empowering individuals to uphold cohesion without external interventions.

Contribution of the study

Enhancing peaceful coexistence between one million Rohingya refugees and local communities in Cox's Bazar's ongoing long-term refugee situation is crucial. This study aims to contribute to the limited literature on social cohesion in refugee-hosting setting in Cox's Bazar, providing empirical evidence and efficient management strategies. It also enhances discourse on measurement and explores potential design and implementation components to promote harmonious cohabitation.

Acknowledgment

This study is based on a research supported by the University Grants Commission of Bangladesh (UGC) and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) funded Bilateral Research Project for FY-2022 (2022-24). We express our gratitude to Professor Gyo Miyahara, Professor Kazuto Ikeda, Takaya Hayashi, Shota Okanao, Taihei Kikuchi, Chung Tai Li, Ao Mengling, Fan Chih-Ying for their logistical support, valuable insights, and helpful suggestions during the project. We also extend thanks to six young researchers, namely Mushfiqur Rahman, Sadia Afroze, Aisa Yeasmin,

Abdul Mannan, Din Mohammed, and Afsana Jahan Dolon, for their diligent efforts in gathering primary data from various refugee camps and neighboring host communities.

Ethical considerations

This study presents numerous findings from a project on social cohesion, financially supported by UGC and JSPS, where we served as the principal investigator. The research and analysis strictly adhered to ethical requirements, including appropriate training for data collection, obtaining informed consent from informants, and ensuring confidentiality. Sensitivities such as gender issues, security concerns, human rights, and children's issues were also carefully considered. Furthermore, hygiene protocols were diligently followed throughout the study.

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