

play to learn



NYU

Global TIES
for Children

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Community Engagement for Early Childhood Development (ECD) Programs:

Perspectives of the Rohingya and Other Stakeholders in Cox's Bazar



Introduction

Since its inception, partners of the LEGO Foundation-funded Play to Learn project have prioritized co-construction and community engagement^{1,2} in designing and running programs that target children and caregivers in Bangladesh affected by the Rohingya displacement crisis. This includes the Humanitarian Play Labs (HPLs), a flagship program of BRAC, one of the main humanitarian partners implementing early childhood development (ECD) activities under Play to Learn. Given the emphasis and importance placed on community engagement in the HPL set-up and operations, Global TIES for Children at NYU, as the main research partner of the project, conducted a specific study to better understand the myriad ways in which community engagement happened around the HPLs and was perceived by the community. The study team, which included project partners and our data collection partner, Arced Foundation, was particularly interested in how participating community members experienced and understood these programs and how they would like to be engaged to sustain them beyond the lifetime of the six-year Play to Learn project.

In conducting this research, the study team deliberately employed participatory research approaches that themselves relied on community engagement as a key strategy for generating specific research questions (related to the study's focus areas), collecting data, and interpreting community input. This brief discusses the importance of participatory research, the process of running a participatory workshop, and reflections on how the data generated is of particular value to humanitarian implementers. In addition to informing program delivery, a broader goal of this work is to contribute to understanding both the "how" of participatory research methods (what goes into them, how they can be organized) and the "why" behind them (the benefits of multi-method approaches and community engagement as key research strategies).



Participatory Research Methods

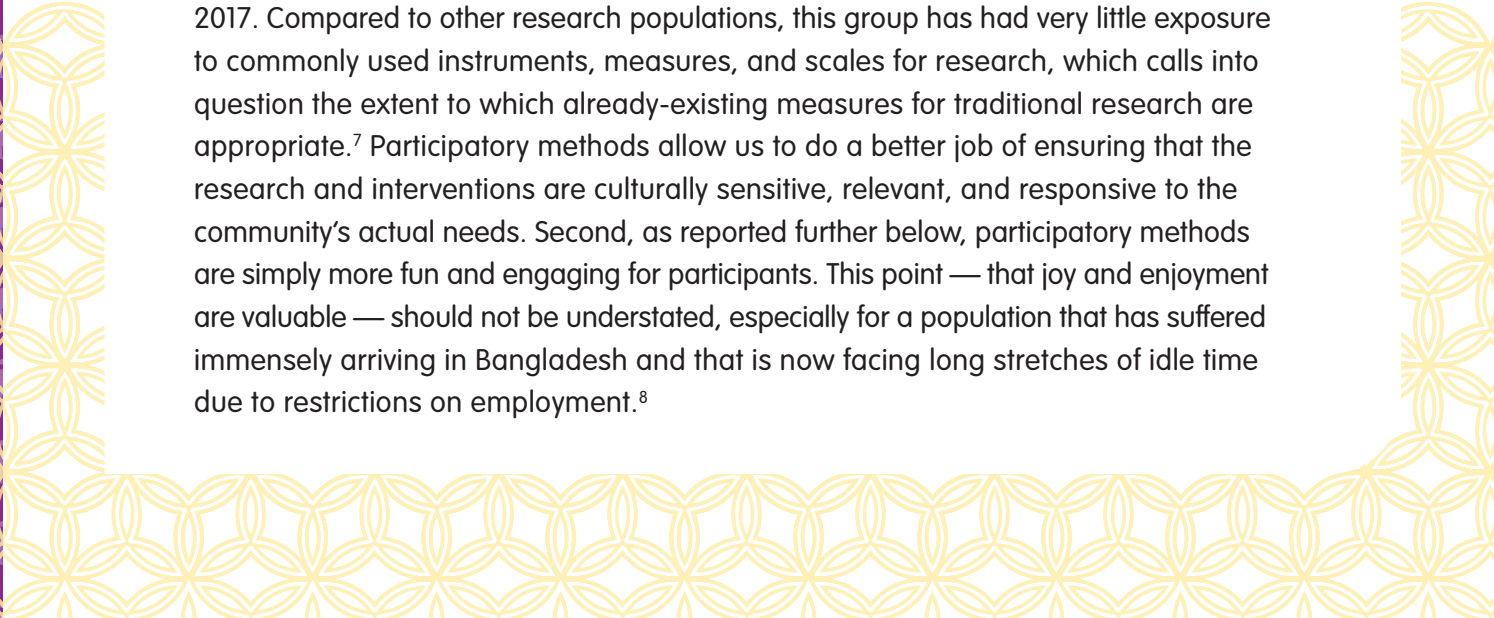
Background

Participatory research methods are an approach to research that involves the active participation of the community or group being studied in the research process.³ Unlike traditional research, where the researcher maintains a distinct separation from participants, participatory research emphasizes collaboration, co-creation, and shared ownership of the research process. This method values the participants' knowledge and experiences and aims to directly address the community's real needs and concerns. While such methods can take many different forms in how they are implemented and used, they all have in common the idea that the research is done "with" people and not "on" people.⁴ By involving participants in all stages, from defining research questions to collecting and analyzing data, participatory research

ensures the findings are relevant and can directly benefit the community involved. Ideally, by treating participants as co-researchers, this approach builds capacity within the community, fostering skills, knowledge, and confidence with long-lasting benefits beyond the research project.

These methods also explicitly acknowledge that the researcher has a responsibility to participants. They have become increasingly popular across the globe in recent years,⁵ particularly in fields of mental health, parenting, social support interventions, and disability. A participatory approach may be particularly well-suited to humanitarian contexts, contexts of forced migration, or with populations that are otherwise vulnerable, as it affords a deeper respect of their own perspectives on the research topics.

Participatory Design with the Rohingya in Cox's Bazar



Participatory approaches are particularly beneficial for this context for two key reasons. First, the Rohingya are considered one of the most persecuted minorities in the world⁶ and have historically had little exposure with external researchers, although this has been changing after the most recent wave of forced migration into Bangladesh in 2017. Compared to other research populations, this group has had very little exposure to commonly used instruments, measures, and scales for research, which calls into question the extent to which already-existing measures for traditional research are appropriate.⁷ Participatory methods allow us to do a better job of ensuring that the research and interventions are culturally sensitive, relevant, and responsive to the community's actual needs. Second, as reported further below, participatory methods are simply more fun and engaging for participants. This point — that joy and enjoyment are valuable — should not be understated, especially for a population that has suffered immensely arriving in Bangladesh and that is now facing long stretches of idle time due to restrictions on employment.⁸



The Intervention: HPLs and Community Engagement

Since the massive forced migration of Rohingya into Cox's Bazar district in 2017, BRAC, an international development organization founded in Bangladesh in 1972, has been working with the Rohingya refugee community to design and implement a range of programs for the Rohingya. These include the Humanitarian Play Labs (HPLs), created to support children and caregivers affected by humanitarian crises in their learning, healing, and growing through play.⁹

In designing the HPLs, BRAC explored and collected local stories (*kissa*), poems (*kabbiya*), play activities, and games through a series of observations, interviews and focus group discussions with parents, adolescents, community members, community leaders (*Majhis*), and Imams. This was a continuous process. They also surveyed children's eligibility. What emerged was a model with an emphasis on providing trauma-aware psychosocial support that uses play to foster children's healthy development and learning and promotes Rohingya language and culture.¹⁰ After developing the curriculum and materials, BRAC tested

them with the community to validate and finalize the contents based on community input. The community also actively participated in the decoration of the HPLs and helped to develop play materials for their children and the HPLs in community workshops. The first 304 HPLs launched in 2019 and were held at Child Friendly Spaces (CFS). They served 20-30 children, aged 2-6 years, at a time. The program has since expanded to include smaller, home-based HPLs for 3-4 year olds, HPL centers in the surrounding host community for 3-5 year olds, and home-based programming for caregivers of 0-3 year olds in the camps.

HPL programming for children 0-6 years old within the camps is run by female, Rohingya play leaders, mother volunteers, and host community paracounselors, who offer additional support to families and frontline workers. Both play leaders and mother volunteers are supervised by BRAC program organizers and managers. Programming for caregivers is run by Rohingya mother and father volunteers, respectively.

The HPLs also act as a connection point to other BRAC programming. For example, BRAC holds Water, Sanitation, and Health meetings on a regular and as-needed basis and Community-based Child Protection Committee (CBCPC) meetings every month. In the CBCPC meeting, attendees might include the *Majhi*, Imam, community volunteers, site management personnel, play leaders, elderly people from the camp, and caregivers of children who attend or attended HPLs.

Finally, as part of the HPL programming, BRAC holds regular community events. These include monthly caregiver meetings; periodic Center Management Committee (CMC) meetings, where attendees discuss maintenance of and new candidates for enrollment into the HPL centers; and a biannual “materials workshop” where they invite the caregivers to come and make toys for the children. Caregivers are also invited to arts sessions to help decorate the HPL centers.

The Research

Design and Methods

There is substantial variation in the application of participatory approaches in designing interventions targeting migrants, depending on the context, the research topic or question, and the resources available for the project. In this case, we already knew we wanted to broadly understand the community’s experience of, and future vision for, the HPLs. This level of pre-determined focus for the research is a departure from most forms of participatory research, which would have encouraged the development of the research need (and related questions) in conjunction with participants. We also had limited time in which to complete the project based on overall timelines and logistical considerations, given some of the constraints to working inside the camps that we had to accommodate. This included safety concerns about where we could conduct our activities and requirements to have left the camps by particular times of day. We had about a



week in which to conduct the research, and we knew that we would be able to find a space to work with a group of about 6-8 participants for several hours a day. Given these considerations, we ultimately moved forward with a participatory approach known as ‘design workshops’,¹¹ which has the following elements:



- **A physical space that is conducive for collaborative engagement and can serve as a meeting point for researchers and community residents to share and conceptualize ideas.**
- **A process that is centered on the interplay of researcher and participant to help navigate and define the relationships between individuals, materials, and topic areas.**
- **An approach that reimagnes community residents as co-designers and partners that are positioned as having equal say in exploring and brainstorming the topic at hand.**

In designing the study, we ultimately opted to run a six-day design workshop, divided into two groups based on sex, i.e. one with all men and one with all women. The study team determined the timeline and selected the participants but gave the participants as much flexibility as possible to determine content based on our guiding questions and activities. That is, the workshops were focused on capturing the knowledge of highest priority to research participants given the topics provided at the start. Activities consisted of rapport building, games, in-depth conversational sessions, individual and group brainstorming, group games, and art activities.

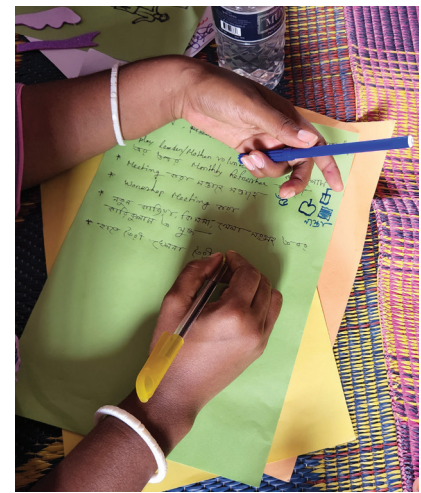
Recruitment

Participants were selected through a combination of purposive and random sampling. A list of prospective members was created drawing from participants we had contact information for based on previous and ongoing work in the Rohingya context in Bangladesh. Individuals were then chosen from that list with a focus on representation from specific stakeholder groups — *Majhis*, Imams, play leaders, paracounselors, mother volunteers, elderly women, and caregivers — as these individuals held roles and responsibilities within their households and communities that afforded them insightful and holistic

perspectives on ECD in the camp context. Within type of person, the selection was random. The end result was 1) a female group consisting of one mother of a 0-2 year old in the HPL, one mother of a 3-6 year old in the HPL, one mother of a child who dropped out of the HPL, a mother with no child ever in HPL, a grandmother, one center-based play leader, one home-based play leader, and a mother volunteer; and 2) a male group consisting of one *Majhi*, a community elder, two Rohingya fathers, one father volunteer, a BRAC field manager, a BRAC paracounselor, and a BRAC programme officer.

Facilitation of Workshops

Two NYU researchers (both female) worked closely with two local enumerators (one male, one female, identified by Arced Foundation) who were fluent in the Chittagonian dialect of Bangla, a dialect with sufficient overlap with Rohingya that it could be used in conducting the workshops. The enumerators, experienced in working within the Rohingya camps and conducting focus groups, also had a deep understanding of the history and background of the Rohingya residents. We conducted a three-day training with these enumerators, prior to the participatory workshops, in which we explained our research topics and methods, built the concepts, and guided them on how to facilitate the participatory sessions.



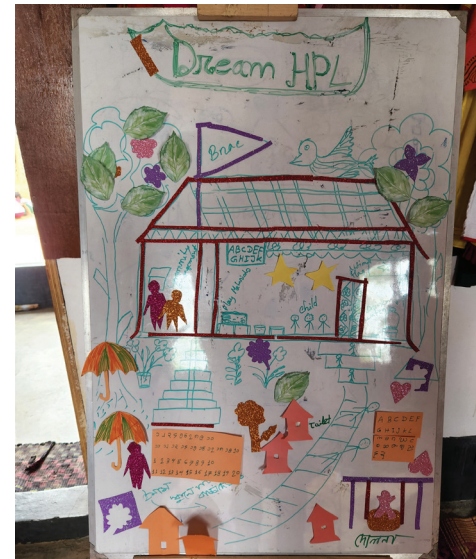
Summary of Daily Activities

The workshop was held at a BRAC skill development center in the Rohingya camps, chosen for its centrality to participants' homes.

Participants were given breakfast, lunch, and snacks each day. Sessions started at 9am and continued for four hours. During the workshops, participants were guided by a set of mutually agreed ground rules, established on the first day, aimed at creating a non-judgemental environment in which participants felt heard, noticed, and valued. The six-day workshop had the following overarching structure:

- **Rapport building and Aspirations:** In the first three days participants shared their aspirations for young children in their community and their perspectives of the HPLs
- **Building a vision of community engagement:** In the fourth and fifth days, participants explored ways to further community engagement with the HPLs. This included a focus on identifying self and community strengths; discussing what their dream HPL would look like, physically, and who would need to be involved if they were to re-design the program; and brainstorming ideas for making the HPLs more sustainable.

- **Theme and framework building:** On the final day, the participants reviewed the knowledge created from the previous days to create a framework to support the sustainability and continuation of HPLs that better reflect the communities' wants, roles, expectations, and hopes for families and children.
- **Illuminative Drawings/Art:** Drawings/art creation was an important aspect of the workshops. Towards the last two days, participants were encouraged to create illuminative drawings using an arts-based technique in which the participants are asked to draw on the topic in question. The drawings are then used as a springboard for creative thinking and exploration of workshop topics.¹² This kind of activity can be an important part of participatory workshops, as the drawing process pushes groups to express ideas that can be difficult to articulate when participants either feel uncertain or are dealing with literacy and/or language barriers.¹³ Furthermore, art activities can be engaging and fun, making them intrinsically motivating for the participants.



Data Analysis

On the final day of the workshop, the study team asked participants to begin reflecting on key themes that had emerged during the course of the workshop — a form of data analysis. The participants were asked to reflect on the *design*, *implementation*, and *development* of HPLs, in that order. Respectively, participants were asked to consider: “*What would your dream HPL look like?*”; “*What kinds of human resources will be needed to run the HPL?*”; and “*How would your HPL continue to be sustainable?*”. These discussions helped to uncover and identify key issues that ultimately shaped the analysis and helped the study team to unearth key themes during subsequent activity.

All workshop sessions, held in a mix of Rohingya and Bangla, were audio-recorded and transcribed into Bangla (with sections translated into English as needed). NYU researchers, all of whom were fluent in both Bangla and English, conducted rigorous thematic analysis of the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts to identify potential patterns. They systematically coded interesting data points, which were then transformed into the themes that shaped the final findings. Themes were continually reviewed and refined during analysis.

Preliminary Findings

In analyzing the recordings of the workshop, seven themes emerged that loosely fall into two categories: themes that focus on how the community can be engaged as a collaborator in the HPLs and those that are primarily recommendations about how to improve the HPL operations. Though we have pulled apart these themes for the sake of analysis and write-up, there is significant overlap between many of them, and they often support, reinforce, and/or feed into each other. The two categories of seven total themes are listed below:



A. The community as a collaborator

1. Fostering Sustainable Trust
2. Empowering Community Members to Take Community Ownership
3. Focusing on Capacity Building

B. HPLs operational recommendations

4. Continuing to Integrate Rohingya Culture in the Curriculum
5. Transitions Beyond ECD
6. Ensuring Children's Safety with Intention and Strategy
7. Prioritizing making HPLs better resourced and more comfortable for children

These have been compiled and developed into what we are calling: the Effective Community Engagement within the Rohingya context (ECER) framework. This framework broadly focuses on how to make the HPLs better reflect the communities' wants, needs, and expectations in relation to their children's early development opportunities. A more detailed review of these findings will be the topic of future writing.





Conclusion

In investigating community engagement in the design of the HPLs, this study sought to extend the community engagement approach by using participatory research methods to understand perceptions of an early childhood development program model actively being implemented in a humanitarian setting. Ultimately, we selected a participatory approach for several reasons that may be relevant for other practitioners or scholars who are designing similar studies in similar settings.

First, the study questions lent themselves, scientifically, to participatory methods. In an under-researched population such as the Rohingya, the design workshop approach also helped to ensure two critical needs in our research: 1) that participants and researchers were aligned on meanings and definitions; and 2) that we did not inadvertently overlook important details of the community's perception of the HPLs. Concepts like "community engagement" and "early childhood development" can be difficult to translate and do not always mean the same thing to all people, even without a

language barrier. By engaging participants over time in an in depth, collaborative way, we were able to establish a set of shared definitions for the concepts under discussion. We were also able to create the conditions in which the conversation could veer towards topics that were of significance to the participants, including areas of inquiry we might not have thought to ask on our own. Because of this approach, we are confident in our understanding of what the participants meant when they said different things, and we covered more areas than we would have if we had gone in with a more conventional survey questionnaire or interview guide based on our own assumptions about what was important or not.

Though these benefits are generally understood as some of the advantages to participatory research methods, research implementers often cite logistical

constraints as a reason not to use them. In many cases, in-depth participatory methods are simply not possible because participants are unable to provide the time necessary to engage in them. This is not the case here — and may not always be the case in contexts where limited labor and/or entertainment opportunities exist — given that the participants had long stretches of available time. Even with the high levels of availability, we were originally unsure about the extent to which our selected community members would be interested in participating, but they proved to be willing, and eager, to be involved for multiple hours a day, multiple days in a row. According to them, they were very happy to have a space in which they could voice their ideas and enjoyed the interactivens and collaborative nature of the workshops.

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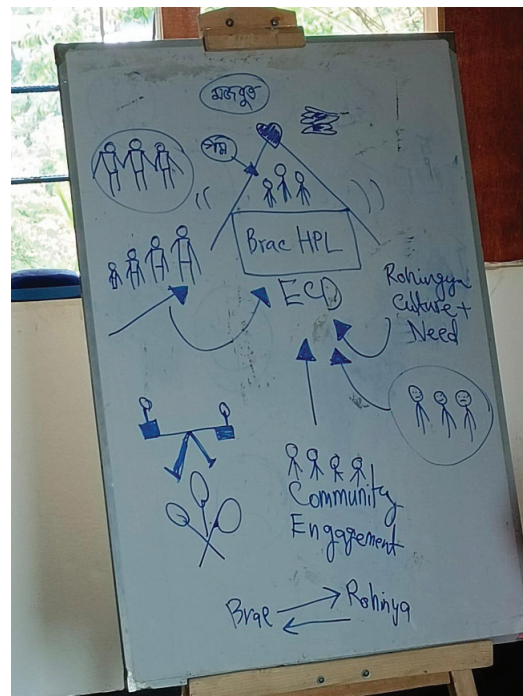
We are so happy that
Apa you came to
listen to us and sat
with us for so many
ideas to discuss and
value our ideas, thank
you! We look forward
to having more such
conversations!

— **Research participant**

This is the second important argument for using participatory approaches whenever appropriate and possible: they can be more meaningful for participants than other approaches that seek to extract data about predetermined questions, rather than actively engage them. In using participatory methodologies in this setting, participants who have inevitably faced significant hardship both feel more valued and have more fun. There is value in and of itself in making the research process an experience from which participants actually get some immediate benefit. This can invert conventional power dynamics in the research-participant relationship, making researchers learners and establishing participants as the experts of their own lives.



While analysis of the workshop data was ongoing at the time of producing this brief, we hope participant perspectives in this study will be a catalyst for important conversations between the various stakeholders involved in the future direction of the HPLs and that they will play a role in creating deeper, sustained community engagement in early childhood in the region. We also hope that this study will act as a blueprint to other projects and programs looking to continue to involve community members past program creation. Community voices and ideas are likely of particular importance in ensuring the long-term sustainability and ongoing adaptation and improvement of programs. Creating regular and productive spaces for them to be heard is crucial to this goal.



Endnotes

1. By community engagement we mean the deliberate integration of communities as research and program partners in order to build interventions that are sustainable and meaningful to community members. For more information, see: Kabue, M., Abubakar, A., Ssewanyana, D., Angwenyi, V., Marangu, J., Njoroge, E., Ombech, E., Mokaya, M. M., Obulemire, E. K., Mugo, C., Malti, T., Moran, G., Martin, M.-C., Proulx, K., Marfo, K., Zhang, L., & Lye, S. (2022). A community engagement approach for an integrated early childhood development intervention: a case study of an urban informal settlement with Kenyans and embedded refugees. *BMC Public Health*, 22(1), 711. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-13185-x>
2. Participation of and accountability to affected populations are increasingly seen as high-stakes policy and practice priorities in humanitarian contexts. For more information, see: Parker, E., Maynard V., & Gordon, M. (2023). Community Engagement in Humanitarian and Development Action: Barriers, Enablers, and Good Practice (Working Paper 1). Action Against Hunger. <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/community-engagement-humanitarian-and-development-action-barriers-enablers-and-good-practice>
3. E.g. Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2008). *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*. SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848607934>
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7. See e.g.: Goodfriend, L., Wuermli, A., Hiott, C., Trang, K., Iqbal, Y., & Castelyn, J. (2022b, July 25). *Delivering Quality Research in Culturally Dynamic, Conflict-Affected Contexts: Lessons from Large-Scale Pilot Research in Cox's Bazar*. NYU Global TIES for Children. <https://globaltiesforchildren.nyu.edu/resources/delivering-quality-research-in-culturally-dynamic-conflict-affected-contexts-lessons-from-large-scale-pilot-research-in-coxs-bazar>
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