

POLICY BRIEF:

**Madrasa education in crisis:
evaluating educational gaps
and solutions for Rohingya
and host communities in
Cox's Bazar**

The Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) Research Programme Consortium is a global research and learning partnership that strives to transform education policy and practice in conflict and protracted crisis around the world – ultimately to help improve holistic outcomes for children – through building a global hub for a rigorous, context-relevant and actionable evidence base.

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ERICC is led by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) with Academic Lead IOE, UCL’s Faculty of Education and Society, and expert partners include Centre for Lebanese Studies, Common Heritage Foundation, Forcier Consulting, ODI, Osman Consulting, Oxford Policy Management and Queen Rania Foundation. During ERICC’s inception period, NYU-TIES provided research leadership, developed the original ERICC Conceptual Framework and contributed to early research agenda development. ERICC is supported by UK Aid.

Countries in focus include Bangladesh (Cox’s Bazar), Jordan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Nigeria, South Sudan and Syria.

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Executive summary

This policy brief synthesises findings from an ERICC formative study titled “Understanding madrasa education for enhancing access to and quality of education for the Rohingyas and the host community” (forthcoming 2024), which was identified as a research priority after a comprehensive evidence review¹ and extensive consultations with stakeholders in Cox’s Bazar². The study investigated teaching and learning practices in madrasas, the knowledge and skills imparted through various branches of the madrasa curriculum, and student assessment processes. The primary objective is to explore potential collaborations between madrasas and humanitarian education providers to improve the quality of education. The brief highlights the role of madrasa education in providing access to education for both Rohingya refugees and the host community, as well as the challenges such as inadequate infrastructure and teacher training. To enhance the quality of madrasa education, the brief recommends a multifaceted approach for both communities, including socio-emotional learning, professional development for teachers, mental health support and gender equality.

A. Background

Cox’s Bazar District in Bangladesh presents one of the world’s most challenging contexts for education in conflict and protracted crises. This district is home to over one million Rohingya refugees, including 481,000 school-age children. These refugees face significant challenges in accessing quality education due to government restrictions on Bangla-language education and the unstable security environment³. Bangladesh hosts the largest number of registered Islamic seminaries in the subcontinent and is the second largest Islamic Seminary in the world after Indonesia. In this crisis, 7% of children from the host and 20% of children from the Rohingya community attend madrasas, Islamic seminaries that offer religious and general education⁴. The rate of attending madrasas is much higher among out-of-school children in the camps, at 44%⁵. However, there is limited systematic evidence on why communities prefer madrasas, the quality of education provided, and how madrasas interact with other educational actors such as the government and NGOs.

B. Methodology

The study used a mixed-methods research design to gather qualitative and quantitative data from both the host and Rohingya communities. We collected data from: 80 madrasas (40 in the camps and 40 in the host community), 25 community leaders, 241 teachers (140 camp and 101 host), 245 parents (119 camp and 126 host), and 934 students (459 camp and 475 host). The study represents the first systematic effort to collect data from all key stakeholders involved in madrasa education in

¹ Saha, P., Haque, A., Hasan, G., Abedin, M., Dow, J., Zaw, H. T. & Ferrans, S. (September 2023). Evidence to practice: the case of education in an emergency context – Cox’s Bazar. ERICC Working Paper.

² Haque, A., Diazgranados, S., Saha, P., Abedin, M. & Hasan, G. (2023). ERICC Country Research Agenda. Cox’s Bazar. ERICC

³ Rahman, M. M., Shindaini, A. J. M. & Husain, T. (2022). Structural barriers to providing basic education to Rohingya children in the Kutupalong refugee camp, Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. International Journal of Educational Research Open.

⁴ CBPS (2021). Cox’s Bazar Panel Survey Briefs. [World Bank](https://www.worldbank.org). [Cox’s Bazar Panel Survey Briefs \(worldbank.org\)](https://www.worldbank.org)

⁵ REACH (2019). Education needs assessment brief - Camp 26 - Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, February 2019.

Cox's Bazar, around four critical areas of inquiry: policy system actors and coherence, community preferences, access to education, and the quality of education.

C. Key findings

Policy system level

Overview of actors: The madrasa education system in Cox's Bazar involves various actors, including government bodies, madrasa boards, local authorities and NGOs. However, there is limited coherence among these entities, resulting in policy and resource gaps.

Types of madrasas: In Bangladesh, there are two main types of madrasas: Aliya and Qawmi (Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2009):

- Aliya madrasas are regulated by the government, and offer both religious teaching and secular subjects such as maths, science and English⁶
- Qawmi madrasas operate independently, focusing solely on Islamic education and resisting government oversight^{7 8}. Recently, some Qawmi madrasas introduced language, maths and science education up to Grade 8 level.

Role of madrasa boards: Madrasa boards, such as the Bangladesh Madrasa Education Board (BMEB) for the Aliya stream and Wifaqul Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh for the Qawmi stream, aim to balance religious instruction with the inclusion of general education. While Aliya madrasas integrate secular curricula, this opportunity is limited in Qawmi madrasas⁹.

Resource and infrastructure limitations: Both types of madrasas face challenges in providing teacher training and maintaining quality due to limited resources and infrastructure¹⁰. They also struggle with resistance to reform across both government-regulated and independent madrasas¹¹

Lack of formal policies for refugees: The Bangladesh government has no formal policies for religious education in Rohingya refugee camps, leaving madrasas, such as Maktabs, Noorani and Qawmi madrasas, to fill the gap¹²

Curriculum and teaching challenges for refugees: Despite following the Qawmi curriculum, which includes some instruction in multiple languages and mathematics, teaching is primarily in the Rohingya dialect. Both education providers and students face challenges from inadequate support,

⁶ Asadullah, M. N. & Chaudhury, N. (2009). Holy alliances: public subsidies, Islamic high schools, and female schooling in Bangladesh. *Education Economics*, 17(3), 377-394.

⁷ Bano, M. (2013). Madrasa reforms and Islamic modernism in Bangladesh. *Modern Asian Studies*, 48, 911-939 (<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X12000790>).

⁸ Al-Hasani, S. M. A. (2020). Madrasah education in Bangladesh: A comparative study between aliya and qawmi. *Journal Of Creative Writing (ISSN-2410-6259)*, 4(2).

⁹ Riaz, A. (2011). Madrassah education in pre-colonial and colonial South Asia. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 46(1), 69-86 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909610387758>).

¹⁰ Kusakabe, T. (2013). Diversification of Madrasa Education in Rural Bangladesh: Comparative Study of Four Villages. *CICE Series*, 5(1), 141-156.

¹¹ Parveen, S. & Nidhi, G. (2024). Impact of government intervention on the quality and outcomes of madrasas: a comprehensive study. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(6), 860-868.

¹² Rahman, M. M., Shindaini, A. J. M. & Husain, T. (2022). Structural barriers to providing basic education to Rohingya children in the Kutupalong refugee camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*.

resources, and facilities. Additionally, the absence of official recognition and reliance on precarious memorandums of understanding (MoUs) for space-sharing complicates the provision of quality education.

Role of NGOs and civil society: Madrasas maintain a solid and productive relationship with local civil society, such as community organisations, for resources. Madrasas are largely uncharted territory for NGOs, partly due to a lack of information about the madrasa system and policy direction. NGOs advocate for equitable education but often face challenges in coordinating with government bodies and madrasas due to policy barriers and resource limitations. The lack of coordination among actors highlights the need for a more strategic approach to policy coherence, resource distribution and curriculum development to improve madrasa education for both Rohingya and host communities.

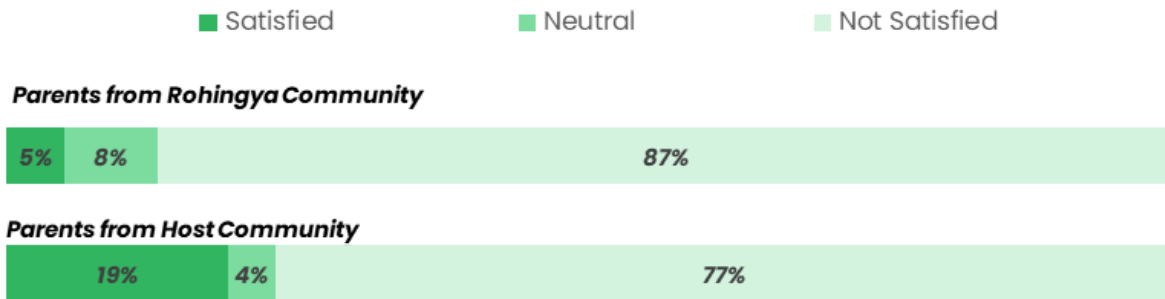
Pre-existing community preferences for madrasas

Financial factors: The study found that madrasa enrollment in Cox's Bazar is primarily influenced by financial factors. Among the host community, 73% of parents who have a child attending madrasas indicated that the lower cost of madrasa education is a key factor in their decision to send children to madrasas. General education often involves additional expenses for uniforms, books and exam fees, which are burdensome for economically disadvantaged families. In contrast, many madrasas, especially non-government ones, charge little or nothing for tuition and offer stipends or free meals.

Balancing religious values and practical needs: 76% of Rohingya parents with children in madrasas chose madrasa education primarily to preserve their Islamic faith and ensure the moral upbringing of their children. Despite acknowledging that general schools may offer superior facilities and education, many parents choose madrasas due to their affordability and the emphasis on religious instruction. This decision reflects a strong desire to maintain religious values amidst displacement and uncertainty, while also balancing financial constraints and the necessity for religious fulfilment.

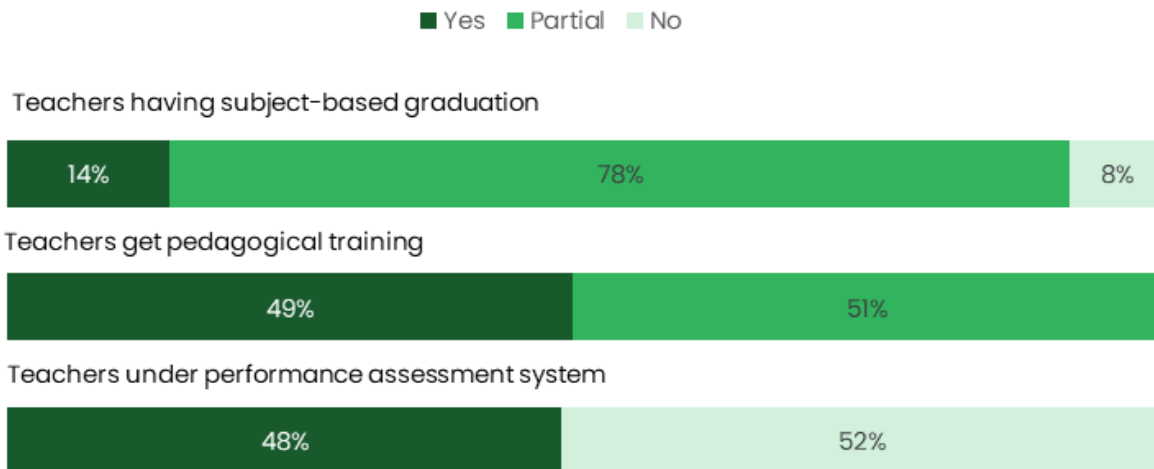
Parental satisfaction and concerns: Parents from both the host and Rohingya communities exhibit mixed views on madrasa education. While 19% of host-community parents and 5% of Rohingya parents are satisfied with the strong Islamic foundation provided, many express concerns about limited career prospects, as madrasa education does not equip students with broader marketable skills. Additionally, parents are dissatisfied with the quality of madrasa teachers due to inadequate training.

Figure 1: Parental satisfaction with madrasa education quality [N=247]



Parents concerns about education quality: Parents express concerns about teacher qualifications (with 78% of teachers lacking subject-based graduation), teaching methods (51% of teachers do not receive comprehensive/standardised pedagogical training), and school infrastructure (100% of madrasas in the camps and 63% of madrasas in the host community have temporary structures, with nearly all madrasas lacking science and computer labs).

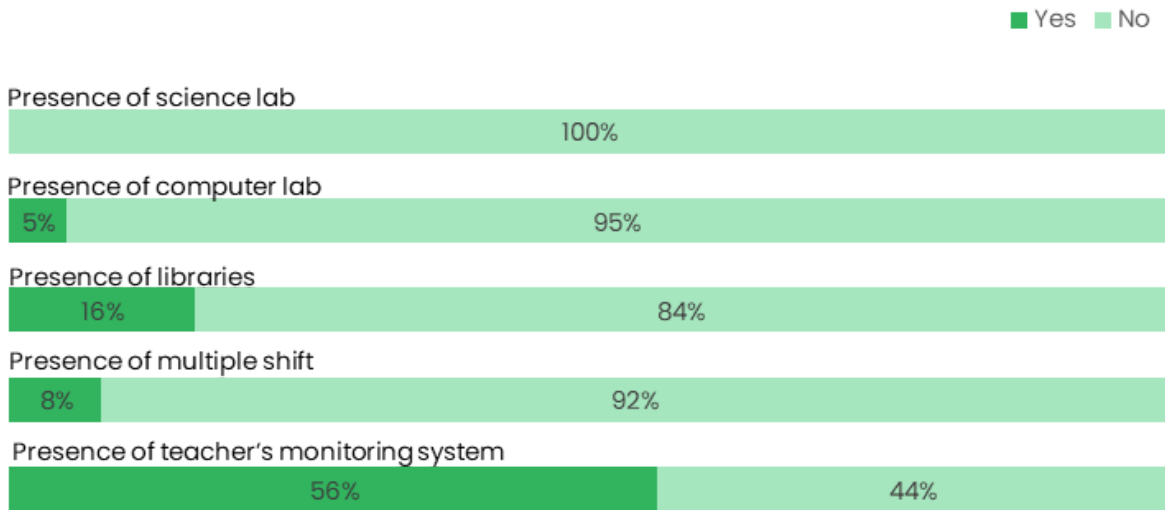
Figure 2: Teacher capacity and provision in surveyed madrasa [N=80]



Quality of education

Infrastructure and learning facilities: Access to madrasa education in both the host community and Rohingya camps faces significant challenges, particularly in terms of infrastructure and learning facilities. In the Rohingya camps, madrasa infrastructure is largely temporary, with 73% of madrasas using tin for fencing and roofs, making them vulnerable to weather conditions. Many lack essential facilities such as separate toilets for boys and girls, fans and proper ventilation, with only 15% offering separate toilets in the camps compared to 25% in the host community. Additionally, none of the madrasas in either setting have science labs, and only 5% have computer labs, highlighting a major gap in accessing digital and practical science education.

Figure 3: Availability of facilities in surveyed madrasas [N=80]



Curriculum and subject matter: Aliya madrasas offer both religious and general subjects, while Qawmi madrasas focus mainly on Islamic studies, with limited integration of subjects like maths and science. This leads to gaps in students' preparedness for future careers. Similarly, Rohingya madrasas emphasise religious education, including Quran memorisation and Islamic studies, but do not incorporate general subjects, which restricts overall academic development.

Teacher training: Inadequate teacher training (51% of teachers do not receive comprehensive/standardised pedagogical training) further diminish the quality of education, leaving students unprepared for future academic and career opportunities.

Learning outcomes

Literacy and numeracy skills

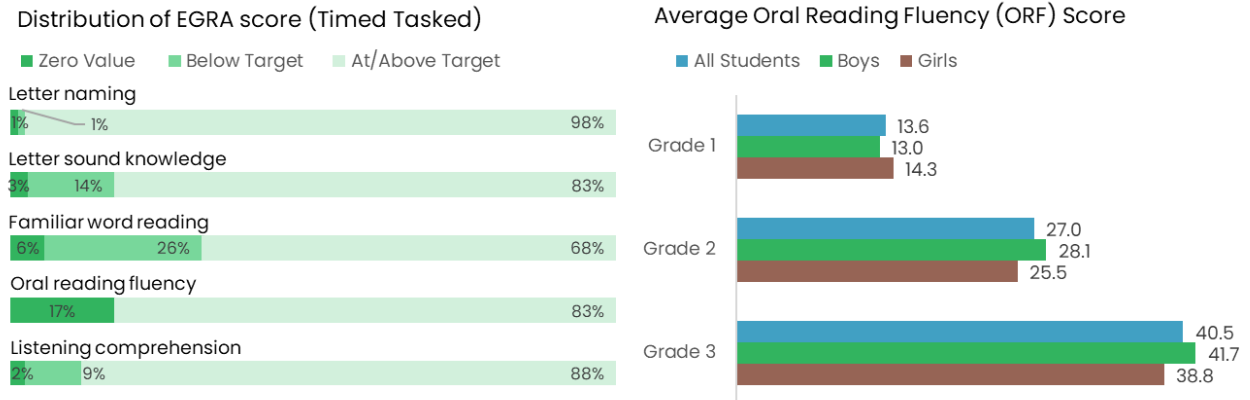
- Madrasa students in the host community perform below average in general education subjects, especially in mathematics, science and language skills. This is evident from their underperformance in national assessments like the Dakil exam (equivalent to Secondary School Certificate¹³), where the passing rate in mathematics was 61.2% in 2022. In the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and Early Grade Math Assessment (EGMA), madrasa students show moderate progress in reading fluency, with improvement from 13.6 words per minute in Grade 1 to 40.5 words per minute in Grade 3. These scores remain below the national benchmark¹⁴ of 44 words per minute. Strong performance in religious subjects like Quranic studies is offset by struggles in general/mainstream subjects, largely due to insufficient teacher

¹³ The Secondary School Certificate (SSC) is an academic credential granted to students after they successfully finish their secondary education, usually between the ages of 16 and 18. It acts as a standard for educational accomplishment and is often necessary for admission to higher education or vocational training programs.

¹⁴ Save the children. The Innovation for Improving Early Grade Reading Activity (IIEGRA), Baseline Survey. Institute of Educational Development (BIED). USAID. [EGRB | Results by Region - Bangladesh \(earlygradereadingbarometer.org\)](#)

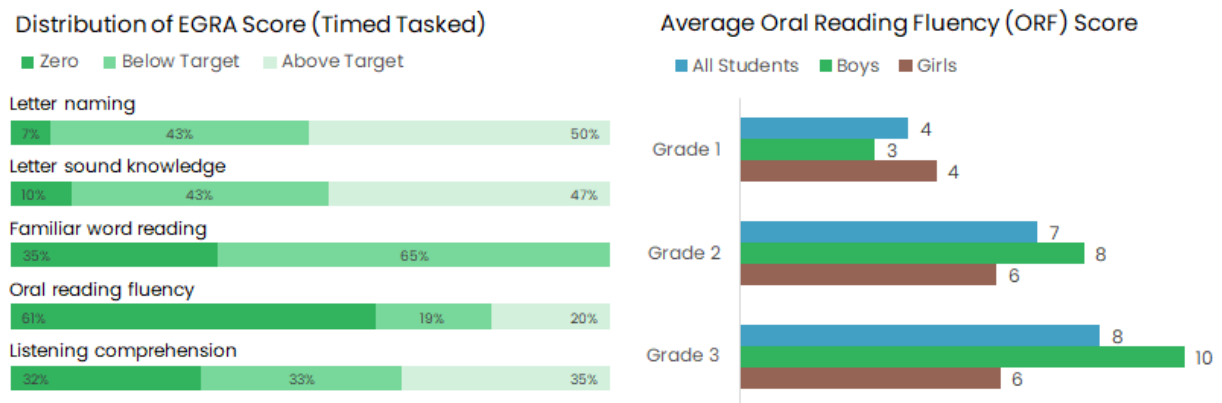
training and resources, which limits broader learning outcomes and career prospects. Classroom observation data indicate that the absence of supplementary learning materials and limited practice opportunities are significant weaknesses in the teaching–learning process.

Figure 4: Distribution of students by EGRA performance levels and average oral Bangla–reading fluency scores in the host community [N = 447]



- Among madrasa students in the Rohingya community, learning outcomes are even lower. On average, students demonstrate reading fluency of only 8 words per minute, with 78% scoring zero in Burmese reading comprehension. Students from learning centres achieve a higher average of 28 words per minute. This implies that a curriculum focused heavily on religious education, with minimal inclusion of general subjects, leads to poor overall academic performance. The lack of trained teachers, poor infrastructure and limited access to educational materials further exacerbate these challenges, resulting in low achievements in general subjects.

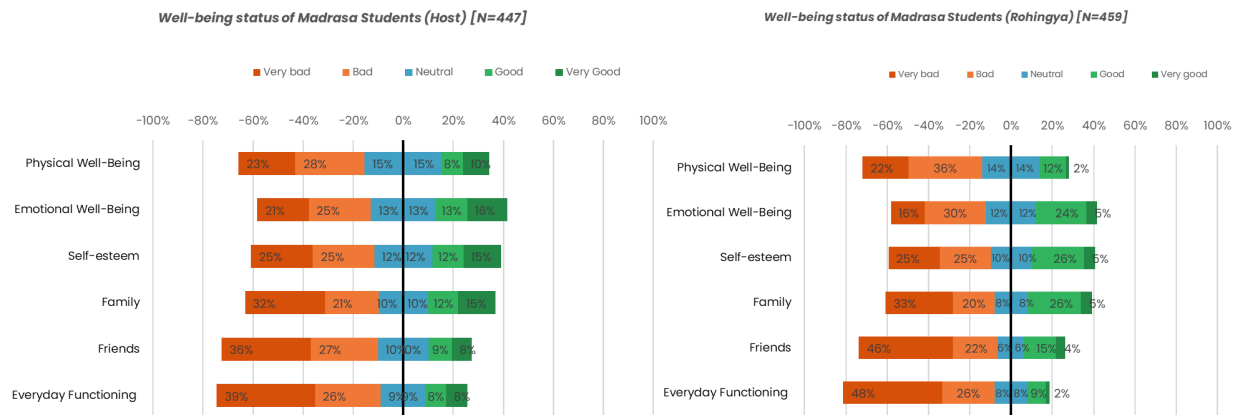
Figure 5: Distribution of students by EGRA performance levels and average oral Bangla–reading fluency scores in the Rohingya community [N = 459]



Wellbeing

- Regarding children’s wellbeing, we observe that large proportions of both host community children and Rohingya refugees exhibit significant challenges in all assessed aspects: 51% of children in the host community and 58% in the Rohingya refugee camps report “bad” or “very bad” physical health; 46% of host community and Rohingya refugees report “bad” or “very bad” levels of emotional wellbeing. Particularly low levels of wellbeing are observed with regards to children’s relationships with friends and family, and their everyday functioning: 63% of host community members and 68% of Rohingya refugees report “bad” or “very bad” relationships with friends, and 65% of host community members and 74% of Rohingya report “bad” or “very bad” levels of everyday functioning (e.g. feeling worried about their future).

Figure 6: Overview of madrasa students’ wellbeing in the host community and the refugee camp



D. Conclusion and recommendations

Madrasa education plays a critical role in providing access to education for both Rohingya refugees and the host community in Cox’s Bazar. However, the system faces significant challenges, including poor infrastructure, inadequate teacher training and limited collaboration with formal education providers. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, as outlined in the following recommendations.

Box 1. Recommendations

Recommendations: for host-community madrasa students

- **Enhance quality:** Expand support at both formal and non-formal levels to improve madrasa education to prevent poor labour-market outcomes and intergenerational inequality. *Actors: Host Community -Ministry of Labour and Employment, TVET Institutions, Ministry of Education, Upazila administration*
- **Teacher training:** Improve teacher training and provide continuous professional development. *Actors: Host community - Madrasa Education Board, District Education Administration, Primary and Secondary Teachers Training Institution, Respectives Madrasa Management Committee.*
- **Infrastructure:** Upgrade infrastructure, to include permanent classrooms, libraries, and computer labs for STEM subjects. *Actors: Host community - Madrasa Education Board, District Education Administration, Primary and Secondary Teachers Training Institution, Respectives Madrasa Management Committee.*
- **Gender equity:** Promote gender equity by recruiting female teachers and creating safe learning environments for girls. *Actors: Upazila Administration, District Education Administration, Respective Madrasa Madrasa Management Committee.*
- **Curriculum alignment:** Revise the curriculum to align with labour-market demands and upskill teachers in secular subjects. *Actors: Madrasa Education Board, Ministry of Education, National Curriculum and Textbook Board.*
- **Transition to mainstream education:** Collaborate with the national education board to facilitate transitions to mainstream education. *Actors: Madrasa Education Board, Ministry of Education., National Curriculum and Textbook Board.*
- **Long-term integration:** Implement phased reforms, starting with teacher training and then infrastructural support, eventually leading to curriculum integration. *Actors: Madrasa Education Board, Ministry of Education.*
- **Psychosocial and social-emotional learning (PSS-SEL) and targeted mental health interventions:** Introduce psychosocial and social-emotional support programs, and targeted mental health interventions, including counselling services and mental health awareness programmes, to support wellbeing. *Actors: Madrasa Education Board, Ministry of Education, District Education Administration.*

Recommendations: for Rohingya-community madrasa students

- **Collaboration:** Foster collaboration between madrasas and humanitarian education providers to ensure that students gain a balanced education that includes both religious and secular subjects. *Actors: Cox's Bazar Education Sector and its implementing partners.*
- **Foundational learning:** Provide access to supplementary materials, language-learning tools and digital tools to improve foundational learning. *Actors: Cox's Bazar Education Sector and its implementing partners.*
- **Infrastructure:** Strengthen madrasa infrastructure to ensure resilience against natural disasters. Provide support for the installation of essential facilities, including science laboratories, computer labs and libraries, to enhance the educational

environment and resources available to students. *Actors: Cox's Bazar Education Sector and its implementing partners.*

- **Subject-based teachers:** Hire subject-based teachers to improve the quality of education in specific subjects. *Actors: Cox's Bazar Education Sector and its implementing partners.*
- **PSS-SEL and mental health:** Implement PSS-SEL programmes and targeted mental health supports to support wellbeing, particularly given the trauma and displacement they have experienced. *Actors: Cox's Bazar Education Sector and its implementing partners.*

Through strategic interventions, it is possible to improve the quality and accessibility of madrasa education, ensuring that all children in Cox's Bazar, regardless of their background, have access to comprehensive and quality education.

