POLICY BRIEF:

The politics and (in)coherence of education in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

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 rigorous, context-relevant and actionable evidence base.

ERICC seeks to identify the most effective approaches for improving access, quality, and continuity of education to support sustainable and coherent education systems and holistic learning and development of children in conflict and crisis. ERICC aims to bridge research, practice, and policy with accessible and actionable knowledge — at local, national, regional and global levels — through co-construction of research and collaborative partnerships.

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.

A. Background

The displacement of the Rohingya people poses a complex challenge for humanitarian, development, and public sectors in Bangladesh. It is considered a 'crisis within a crisis' as Cox's Bazar is one of the country's most deprived districts. Seven years in, around half a million Rohingya children in Cox's Bazar continue to depend on temporary learning centres and religious schools. Learning outcomes remain low with nearly 8 of 10 children under the age of 12 unable to read.

Problems persist despite considerable efforts from humanitarian actors to improve the quality of education and coordinate humanitarian and development investments in Rohingya and host community education. As part of a Joint Response Plan, development actors have shifted their regional focus within Bangladesh to provide more basic education projects in Cox's Bazar and have allocated grants to cover humanitarian needs. Nonetheless, the possibility of a joint education response is constrained by the contradictory normative and political incentives across development and humanitarian sectors and the Government of Bangladesh.

This policy brief draws from the findings of a longer Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis (ERICC) working paper[1] which explored the drivers and outcomes of dissonance between official intentions for cross-sectoral coordination, also referred to as the 'humanitarian-development nexus', and the default operations of the Education Sector. It is based on 38 key informant interviews conducted in 2022 and 2023 with stakeholders in Cox's Bazar and a review of relevant literature. This brief summarizes the sources of education system (in)coherences in Cox's Bazar, drawing out the links between sector operations and the key actors' de facto incentives and capacities, and illustrates the value of understanding how these political economy drivers shape the contours of plausible reforms to improve education coherence in emergencies.

B. Drivers of education system (in)coherence in Cox's Bazar

Problems in providing quality education to Rohingya learners stem in large part from conflicting normative goals on the part of the humanitarian and development sectors, and the Government of Bangladesh. Humanitarian actors have been driven primarily by ensuring access to education for Rohingya communities, with development actors more focused on attempts to improve its quality (for both host and Rohingya communities), but for the Government of Bangladesh Rohingya education should serve an ultimate goal of repatriation. This desire is motivated by fears about the resource burden incurred by hosting a large number of refugees – and hence a desire not to encourage more – as well as by the potential risks to the ruling party's dominance posed by political instability in Cox's Bazar (Hargrave et al. 2020). The government is also sceptical that international support will be sustained if Rohingya refugees are integrated or as the crisis lengthens, and is reluctant to take on development loans to meet Rohingya needs. Moreover, the government has expressed an unwillingness to be admonished by Global North countries who themselves are reluctant to host substantial numbers of refugees (Hargrave et al. 2020). These crucial political economy considerations have affected the government's response and humanitarian and development actors' room for manoeuvre, at every turn.

This emphasis on repatriation has anchored the education response around short-term humanitarian support and limited the scope for long-term development strategies. From the government's perspective,

---

[1] Homonchuk, O., Sharp, S. and Nicolai, S. (2024). Political economy and (in)coherence of the education system in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. ERICC Working Paper. https://inee.org/resources/political-economy-and-incoherence-education-system-coxs-bazar-bangladesh

international education efforts should do more to be consistent with the government's policy of repatriation. As such, the government put substantial constraints on the ability of international actors to improve the quality of education for Rohingya in the early years of the crisis (2017-2021). This included restrictions on the size and quality of camp learning centres, on the use of Bangladeshi national curriculum, and on community-led and religious education. At the same time, the focus on repatriation has involved emphasizing Myanmar identity and developing skills for the labour market in Myanmar.

The most promising reform to education provision – that is, the government's agreement for the Myanmar curriculum to be used for Rohingya education in camps – has been achieved by framing it within this repatriation paradigm. In 2020, the government permitted the humanitarian sector to use the Myanmar curriculum for Rohingya learners, following lobbying from the Education Sector. From the government's perspective, the key objective of the curriculum rollout is to remind the Rohingya that 'they belong to Myanmar where they will go back someday' (Taipei Times, 2022), and they have encouraged NGOs to implement the curriculum in a way that will create a sense of Burmese identity among Rohingya. As discussed below, the Myanmar curriculum does not address many of the fundamental challenges of poor quality education for Rohingya communities, however it does provide a 'formal' (even if uncertified) curriculum with clear subjects, grades and a pathway to secondary education. And since the 2020/21 rollout of the Myanmar curriculum, access to education for Rohingya children has been rapidly expanding (Hossain, 2023).

Rhetorically, international actors and the government are in agreement on the need to finance and support host community education. Accordingly, they have formulated Joint Response Plans, key coordination frameworks between the government and the humanitarian sector which address the needs of both Rohingya and host communities. The first few highlighted needs and practical steps towards achieving a development–humanitarian nexus but this disappeared from later iterations. The underlying political economy drivers appear to be a decline in bilateral donor support and a deteriorating relationship between the US (the largest donor in education) and Bangladesh (Ahasan 2022; Chowdhury 2023; Curtis et al. 2023; Rasid 2023). Available funding and political dynamics appear then to shape joint targets and framing, rather than the other way around (Education Sector, 2022). Moreover, the international community's hope that development funds would motivate the government towards assimilating Rohingya refugees has not been realized.

Differing visions for education in the humanitarian sector and the Rohingya community have led to operations that are suboptimal for ensuring continuity and quality. To expand Rohingya access to foundational learning, the humanitarian sector established non-formal learning centres and accelerated learning programs run by NGOs. Until the recent rollout of the Myanmar curriculum, this type of education provision did not correspond with the Rohingya community's appeals for more expansive provision of education that resembles the content and format of formal basic and secondary schools. At the same time, Rohingya continued to access education through informal tutoring networks and *madrasas*. As the crisis progressed, government restrictions have made humanitarian coordination with Rohingya-led education initiatives more difficult, making even more disjunction between Rohingya and humanitarian efforts to provide education. This example underscores the importance of prioritizing quality alongside access from the start of the crisis. Without ensuring quality and aligning curriculum content with parents' expectations, improvements in access might be limited.

The lack of inclusion of Rohingya communities in humanitarian planning may have led to other programming shortcomings. One example surrounds the complex causes of school non-attendance. Humanitarian sector actors often conclude that 'sociocultural beliefs and practices' are the main reason

for low enrolment among adolescent girls, as parents 'report that education is not appropriate for their children' (UNICEF, 2018, p. 8) and prevent girls from leaving the house (Education Sector, 2020, p. 52). However, this emphasis on the 'cultural norm barriers' to school enrolment during the early years of the response often lacked acknowledgement of collective traumas around gender violence that contributed to parental fears about girls traveling to school. This led to significant delays in the inclusion of therapeutic support in education programmes as well as in the provision of female-led, gender-segregated, and close-to-home learning points for adolescent girls.

The current funding structure in the humanitarian sector fails to incentivize improvements in learning outcomes, partially because data systems and funding renewal mechanisms are not aligned for this purpose. That is, sector-specific data systems focus primarily on capturing enrolment and demographic data as the education provider performance reviews and contract renewals are based on these metrics. Consequently, the lack of comparable and aggregate data across camp learning providers remains a significant gap. This lack of coherence for learning across data and financial mechanisms may in future impede the effectiveness of the rollout of the Myanmar curriculum, particularly in incentivizing and monitoring improvement in Myanmar language skills as well as basic numeracy and literacy skills.

Moreover, the rollout of the Myanmar curriculum highlights tensions between short-term humanitarian funding and program modalities, and the long-term goals of education systems in protracted conflicts and crises. The protracted nature of the crisis calls for more predictable funding for Rohingya education, but the short-term nature of the humanitarian approach, combined with the government's emphasis on repatriation, makes this extremely challenging. Funding typically lasts less than a year, forcing children to drop out of school and teachers to find alternative employment when funding ends (Katende et al., 2020). At the same time, relying on reactive development grants and bilateral initiatives to fill funding gaps does not appear to be a sustainable solution (Loy and Alexander, 2022).

C. Opportunities for strengthening education system coherence in Cox's Bazar

The above analysis offers two key implications for strengthening education system coherence in Cox's Bazar.

First, it illustrates the importance of developing education reforms that are not just beneficial if implemented, but are also politically feasible. In other words, reforms that complement the different incentives motivating key actors in the education system. For humanitarian and development actors, this means being sensitive to the veto power the Government of Bangladesh has over any education policy for Rohingya populations. Successful reforms will either work with the government's desire for education to serve eventual repatriation, or use plausible levers to shift the government's perspective. The offer of development finance for integrating the Rohingya was an attempt at the latter but has not proved successful because it did not address the underlying long-term financial and political concerns. Arguably, international actors might have realized that and adapted their approach more quickly. As financing has declined, and geopolitical relations worsened, their leverage has only shrunk further. Finding ways to align beneficial policy reforms (even if 'second-best options') with the government's normative approach to education thus has become even more pressing.

Second, the analysis has identified several constraints which have led to incoherence between stated objectives of the education response and de facto practice. To strengthen education system coherence, humanitarian and development actors could thus focus on:

- Transitioning from a reactive financing model to predictable and flexible humanitarian funding;
- Involving the Rohingya community not only in service delivery coordination but also in decisions regarding overarching education strategies and the allocation of financial resources;
- Establishing secure data-sharing platforms for enhanced usability of existing data, with the rollout of the Myanmar curriculum providing an opportunity to improve alignment;
- Creating incentives for providers in consultation with local actors to track and evaluate learning outcomes moving beyond tracking student enrolment;
- Allocating sufficient resources to address the scarcity of Myanmar language skills among Education Sector staff.

D. Working with the political economy of education (in)coherence in emergencies

Rhetorically at least, 'humanitarian-development coherence' is a priority for development and humanitarian actors to achieve collective outcomes in crisis contexts. In education responses, this includes aims to layer interventions to amplify impact, work in the same locations and identify shared outcomes, while still protecting the integrity of humanitarian and development spaces (Nicolai et al., 2019; INEE, 2021; Sommers et al., 2022).

However, as this study illustrates, cross-sectoral coherence cannot be achieved by intentions alone. The realization of a coordinated education response depends on the interplay of the norms, capacities, and operational modalities of the different actors involved and their relation to underlying political economy drivers. These can be misaligned across different types of actors and/or from (inter)national-level policy statements to on-the-ground operational realities. As illustrated by the Rohingya response, political economy factors, and in particular contrasting norms and unequal power relations among key actors, shape the contours of plausible education system improvements. They also highlight the importance of framing education reforms in politically acceptable ways. An understanding of this political economy is the first stage for development and humanitarian actors to 'think and work politically' in improving the coherence, and ultimately outcomes, of education in emergencies response.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ahasan, N. (2022). Bangladesh caught in the middle of US-Russia power struggle. Benar News. www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/power-struggle-01032023154228.html

Chowdhury, KR. (2023). In a first for a Russian foreign minister, Lavrov travels to Bangladesh. https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/bengali/minister-visit-09062023160332.html

Curtis, J., Loft, P. and Robinson, T. (2023). Support for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. House of Commons Library. Debate Pack. https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2023-0095/CDP-2023-0095.pdf

Education Sector (2020). Education Sector in Cox's Bazar – Multi-year Strategy. https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/education-sector-cox-s-bazar-multi-year-strategy

Education Sector (2022). Cox's Bazar Education Sector monthly meeting notes for Wednesday, 17 August 2022. www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/education_sector_meeting_17_august_2022.pdf

Hargrave, K., Holloway, K., Barbelet, V. and Eusuf, M. (2020). The Rohingya response in Bangladesh and the global compact on refugees. Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) Working Paper. London: ODI. https://odi.cdn.ngo/media/documents/The_Rohingya_response_in_Bangladesh_and_the_Global_Compact_on_Refugees_lessons_8B4Bg1o.pdf

Hossain, A. Z. (2023). Educational crisis of Rohingya refugee children in Bangladesh: Access, obstacles, and prospects to formal and non-formal education. *Heliyon*, *9*(7). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e18346

INEE (Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies) (2021). Humanitarian-development coherence in education: working together in crisis contexts. New York: INEE. https://inee.org/resources/humanitarian-development-coherence-education-working-together-crisis-contexts

Katende, S., Gerhardt, L. and Skinner, M. (2020). No time to lose: an urgent call for access to quality education for Rohingya children in Cox's Bazar. International Rescue Committee. https://www.rescue.org/report/no-time-lose-urgent-call-access-quality-education-rohingya-children-coxs-bazar

Loy and Alexander (2022). Key takeaways from the UN's record-breaking tally for 2023 humanitarian needs: Another massive funding gap puts the focus on how to shrink emergency needs. www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2022/12/01/financing-appeals-OCHA-global-humanitarian-overview

Nicolai, S., Hodgkin, M., Mowjee, T. and Wales, J. (2019). White Paper: Education and humanitarian-development coherence. Prepared for USAID's Office of Education. www.edu-links.org/sites/default/files/media/file/Education-and-Humanitairan-Development_April-2019-A.pdf

Rasid, H. (2023). Myanmar-Bangladesh: world actors need to stop Rohingya politics. Eurasia Review OpEd, 7 April. www.eurasiareview.com/07042023-myanmar-bangladesh-world-actors-need-to-stop-rohingya-politics-oped

Sommers, M., Howell, H.J. and Ezzie, O. (2022). Conflict and coherence: investigating humanitarian-development coherence for education in the Middle East and North Africa Region. Case studies of Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. MEERS Research Report. Washington, DC: USAID. https://inee.org/sites/default/files/resources/HDC%20Final%20Report%20Clean_508_8-2-2022.pdf

Taipei Times (2022). 'Myanmar curriculum' for young Rohingya refugees. 24 August www.taipeitimes.com/News/feat/archives/2022/08/24/2003784053

UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) (2018). Bangladesh consolidated emergency report. New York: UNICEF. https://open.unicef.org/sites/transparency/files/2020-06/Bangladesh-CER-2018.pdf