The Rohingya refugee crisis is one of the world’s largest refugee crises. Approximately 60% of the nearly 700,000 Rohingya refugees who have arrived in Bangladesh since 2017 are under the age of 18. Rohingya refugee children are facing an education crisis. The Government of Bangladesh prohibits this new influx of Rohingya refugees from accessing formal education. However, many non-government organizations are providing non-formal education programmes in the refugee camps in southern Bangladesh. We provide a descriptive overview of this education programming landscape. More specifically, we present newly collected data on 126 non-formal education programmes being provided to Rohingya refugee children and youth in the refugee camps in southeastern Bangladesh.

Brief Points

- The programmes – mostly established in 2017 and 2018 – are being implemented by 21 different organizations, with funding from public and private sources.
- For beneficiaries aged 18 or under, approximately 66% are children (3–10 years) and 34% are adolescents (11–18 years).
- Most programmes are open for both boys and girls; however, there appear to be twice as many boys compared to girls among the beneficiaries.
- Community and family members are involved in managing 88% of the education programmes.
- The most frequently mentioned goal is to ensure that Rohingya children and youth achieve a basic education.
- There is a need to understand the extent to which the programmes offer equitable, quality education, and to identify the main barriers for attending the programmes among certain groups.

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The Rohingya Refugee Crisis

One of the world’s major refugee crises is the Rohingya refugee influx from Myanmar into Bangladesh. While there have been outflows of Rohingya refugees in the past, the numbers of Rohingya refugees that arrived in Bangladesh after clashes broke out between Rohingya insurgents and the Myanmar military in October 2016 and August 2017 are unprecedented (Tønnesson and Nilsen 2018). Currently, it is estimated that approximately 900,000 Rohingya refugees live in and around the community of Cox’s Bazar in the far southeastern part of the country. Their living conditions are considered by humanitarian agencies to be dire. Many of the refugees are traumatized, having experienced extreme violence and loss of family members during their flight (IOM 2017). Most have few belongings, and have set up camp wherever possible in geographically difficult terrain with little or no access to aid, safe drinking water, food, shelter or healthcare. The majority of those who have arrived since August 2017 are unregistered, either with the UNHCR or the Bangladesh government, leaving them without guaranteed access to basic humanitarian protection and services.

An Education Crisis

In addition to their difficult living conditions, Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are facing an education crisis. Approximately 60% of the estimated 670,000 new Rohingya refugees that have arrived in southeastern Bangladesh from August 2017 onward are under the age of 18 (IOM 2017). Prior to fleeing the recent violence inflicted by the Myanmar military, the Rohingya population’s access to basic healthcare and education in Myanmar was restricted to an absolute minimum, as the Myanmar government does not recognize the Rohingya population as citizens (Ware and Laoutides 2018; Ibrahim 2016; Lewa 2009). This education crisis is now compounded in Bangladesh, which currently forbids unregistered Rohingya refugees from accessing the country’s public schools, and furthermore prohibits the establishment of secondary schools in refugee camps.

The Bangladesh government has decided to allow non-formal education provision in makeshift settlements for the most recent influx of Rohingya refugees. As a result, major organizations like UNICEF, BRAC, and other large international NGOs are providing non-formal education programmes in so-called “learning centres” in the Rohingya refugee camps. UNICEF has established 700 learning centres and has reached close to 83,000 children in the age group 4–14 (UNICEF 2018), with BRAC acting as one of UNICEF’s key implementing partners in these centres. A standardized learning framework has been developed to guide delivery of non-formal education programmes, and it currently awaits formal government approval.

Mapping Education Programmes for Rohingya Refugees

In order to better understand the education programming landscape in the refugee camps in Bangladesh, during February 2019 Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), Bangladesh and PRIO conducted a survey to map the types of education programmes being offered to Rohingya refugee children and youth. We complemented this survey data with visits to learning centres in several camps during February 2019. We asked programme providers for information about programme history, management, and content, as well as about the beneficiaries served. We collected data on 126 programmes being implemented in 33 camps (see map in Figure 1). As shown in Figure 2 below, the majority of the programmes in our sample were initiated in 2017 and 2018.

Implementing organizations and funding sources

The 126 programmes in our mapping were being implemented by 21 different organizations, with funding from a mixture of public and private sources (see Figures 3 and 4).
As shown in Figure 3, BRAC is by far the largest implementing organization, running as many as 30 out of the 126 programmes. Other top implementing organizations that run five or more programmes include the local NGOs Community Development Centre (CODEC), Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), MUKTI, and Plan International Bangladesh.

UNICEF is by far the largest funder of informal education programmes for the Rohingya, sponsoring 91 of the programmes, with UNHCR as the second largest funder, supporting eight programmes. Other funders include actors such as e.g. Save the Children, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and the LEGO Foundation.

Programme beneficiaries: age and gender

Nearly all (121 out of 126) of the programmes in our sample were serving refugees up to the age of 18. 111 programmes stated they were serving children aged 3 to 10 years, and 104 stated they were serving adolescents aged 11 to 18. In total, the programmes served 165,767 individuals between 3 and 18 years, of which about 2/3 were children (3–10 years) and 1/3 adolescents (11–18 years), as shown in Figure 4. Only seven programmes targeted adults. Organizations use a variety of selection criteria to determine who can participate in their programmes; age was the most commonly cited criterion, followed by refugee status and their ability to attend other learning centres in the camps.

13 programmes offered a breakdown of beneficiaries by gender. In total, these programmes included 64% male and 36% female beneficiaries. Our data do not include age-breakdown, but our interviews with instructors, learners and parents suggested that very few girls attend the programmes after they reach puberty.

Programme content and goals

The programmes in our sample were teaching both cognitive and soft skills, including language instruction and mathematics, as well as drawing, games, singing, and life skills. 120 programmes gave information on language of instruction, and all stated that they taught in both Burmese and Chittagonian language.¹

Programmes have a variety of intended outcomes they wish to achieve. The most frequently mentioned programme goal was to ensure that Rohingya children and youth receive a basic education. A commonly stated desire was to teach particular topics like health, life skills, language, and religion. Another programme motivation was to keep Rohingya children and youth out of criminal activities.

Teachers

121 programmes claimed to be using trained teachers in their education programmes. Teachers used a variety of pedagogical methods, including lecturing, playing games, drawing, using visual aids, and using interactive and group-based learning approaches. Very few programmes stated that they assigned students homework.

Programme management

Community and family members were involved in managing many of the education programmes in our sample. Community members were involved in 112 programmes, family members in
Future research should try to capture the extent to which the non-formal education programmes are providing equitable education. For example, we need to better understand why, and the extent to which, certain groups (e.g. defined by gender, age, or disability) are under-represented in the programmes, and how their learning outcomes may vary.

We also need to capture the variation in terms of education quality across the various programmes and try to identify success factors and best practices.

Notes

1. Registered refugees are allowed to learn in Bangla language.

Further Reading


