



Original Article

Live and Thrive Together: Social Security Challenges and Opportunities for Host Communities Amidst Rohingya Refugee Influx in Bangladesh^{*}

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Abstract

This study investigates the social-security effects of Rohingya refugees on the host community in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, with emphasis on the possibility

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of sustainable coexistence. Whereas previous studies primarily emphasized security threats and economic burdens, this study examines the manner by which both communities can coexist peacefully. Insights from interviews are analyzed using Ager and Stang's integration framework to explore how Rohingya refugees and host communities can coexist. Our findings suggest potential pathways for cooperation that can yield long-term mutual benefits for both communities. Key mechanisms to consider are employment access, equitable healthcare, and participatory engagement between the two groups to promote sustainable coexistence.

Keywords: Refugee, Rohingya, Rohingya Refugee, Bangladesh, Host Community, Coexistence

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the global community has affirmed the fundamental right of every individual to a nationality. However, millions of people remain stateless worldwide (UNHCR, 2024a) and thereby denied the basic recognition of their identity and belonging. Being stateless not only deprives individuals' legal nationality but also excludes them from the protections and opportunities that come with citizenship.

Among several on-going crises involving refugees, the case of the Rohingya people is worthy of analysis from both humanitarian and academic viewpoints. Largely denied their citizenship by Myanmar, they have faced ongoing persecution, displacement, and the denial of fundamental rights, leaving them stateless and vulnerable on the margins of the global community. Significant reductions in support in 2025 demonstrates the challenge for the Rohingya refugee population in Bangladesh. The limited capacity to shelter such a large refugee population, the decreased international funding, and the semi-permanent nature of the crisis have complicated the situation for Bangladesh.

Despite continuous economic progress, Bangladesh is under severe financial, social, and infrastructural strain due to the crisis, with over a million refugees concentrated in Cox's Bazar (Reza, 2024). Since gaining independence in 1971, the country has made significant strides in its economic development, reaching lower-middle-income status by 2015. It is on track to graduate from the UN's Least Developed Countries list in 2026. Since 2017, however, the Rohingya crisis has unexpectedly disrupted planned initiatives, significantly hindering progress towards future development goals (Ahmad & Naeem, 2020). Global attention and financial support for the Rohingya crisis are waning, leading to reductions in essential services like food and healthcare for both refugees and host communities (Hossain, 2019). Additionally, as Myanmar shows limited signs of accepting repatriation, the prolonged nature of the crisis suggests that the Rohingya population may remain in Bangladesh for an indefinite period. These challenges, worsened by international funding shortages, highlight the need for a framework that meets urgent humanitarian needs while promoting lasting, peaceful coexistence between refugees and Bangladeshi host communities.

Consequently, numerous scholars have delved into the complexities involved with the Rohingya refugee crisis, including environmental degradation (Hassan et al., 2018), economic deterioration (UNDP, 2018), employment competition (Sakamoto et al., 2024), and various socioeconomic tensions (Ansar & Md. Khaled, 2021) that have transformed host community dynamics negatively. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to examine sustainable pathways for meaningful coexistence between Rohingya refugees and their host communities within the integration framework. This study explores the social security impacts of the Rohingya refugees on the host community in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, focusing on possibilities for sustainable coexistence. The paper contributes to the literature in 1) addressing an academic gap by providing the way of sustainable coexistence, balancing perspectives from both groups; 2) highlighting the need for long-term solutions beyond short-term aid; and 3) providing policy recommendations to promote economic integration and social cohesion in Bangladesh contexts. To do so, we employed a qualitative approach by conducting expert interviews of stakeholders directly involved with the crises, such as employees of international organizations, those of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and Rohingya community leaders.

The remainder of the paper is structured as following. Section 2 reviews the existing literature on the Rohingya refugee crisis, and highlights gaps in prior studies. Section 3 outlines the research design, detailing the research question, methodology, and the theoretical framework based on Ager and Strang's integration model. Section 4 presents the findings from expert interviews, categorized under the four domains of integration: Markers and Means, Social Connections, Facilitators, and Foundation. Section 5 provides an in-depth discussion of key priorities for coexistence, drawing on comparative cases and policy implications in Bangladesh context. Finally, Section 6 concludes by summarizing the main findings and proposing recommendations for fostering sustainable coexistence between Rohingya refugees and host communities in Bangladesh.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Findings from other cases of refugee crisis demonstrate that refugees also make positive changes to host communities' economic situations. For instance, in

Malawi's Dzaleka Refugee Camp, economic integration not only benefited local economies but also had a broader impact on the national level (Msowoya, 2019). Refugee-led businesses generated employment opportunities and contributed to tax revenues, directly enhancing the economic ecosystem. Similarly, research by Lundström & Stevenson (2005) and Heikkilä (2020) demonstrates that refugees often introduce valuable skills and expertise, making economic diversification and innovation. Furthermore, as noted by Betts et al. (2017) and Ayoubi & Saavedra (2018), enabling refugees to participate in economic activities reduces their dependency on humanitarian aid, creating a more sustainable model of integration.

Many countries have implemented innovative measures to enable refugee economic participation within their unique legal and institutional frameworks. While certain restrictions, such as requiring local partnerships or imposing business start-up conditions, may initially seem limiting, they can also serve as feasible economic opportunities. For example, in Pakistan, refugees can own businesses by partnering with Pakistani citizens, creating opportunities for collaboration and mutual benefit (ILO, 2018). Similarly, in Ecuador, while access to financial institutions is limited, alternative mechanisms like microfinance programs can help refugees start small-scale businesses. In Zambia, high start-up fees for refugee businesses may seem restrictive, but they also establish a regulated framework that allows refugees to participate in the local economy in a structured manner (Alrawadieh et al., 2018; Jacobsen, 2005; Jones & Teytelboym, 2016; Zetter & Ruaudel, 2018). Refugees and asylum seekers in Malawi actively operate businesses across sectors, from rice mills to beauty salons, transportation, and retail. Importantly, they also pay taxes to the Malawian government, illustrating a mutually beneficial system where refugees contribute to the national economy while gaining financial independence. These approaches reflect efforts to balance regulatory requirements with economic opportunities for refugees. They provide examples that refugees can contribute to the host economy. Such measures provide a valuable starting point for creating economic opportunities within constrained systems.

While many countries have supported refugee economic inclusion, Bangladesh still faces challenges due to regional tensions and legal barriers. Myanmar shares a long border with Bangladesh, and the stability of this region significantly influences the relationship between the two countries (Hossain et al., 2020). The Arakan Army, an ethnic Rakhine insurgent group in Myanmar not only affects

Myanmar but also has broader regional impacts, particularly with Bangladesh. In 2017, a brutal military crackdown, described by the UN as ethnic cleansing, forced over 745,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh, where they now live in overcrowded refugee camps. Bangladesh currently hosts the majority of the Rohingya population in Kutupalong, home to the world's largest refugee camp (Gluck, 2019).

Since 2017, the Rohingya in Bangladesh has faced significant legal and social challenges due to their lack of recognized refugee status. The Government of Bangladesh (GoB), rather than classifying the Rohingya as refugees, has labeled them as Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals. This categorization aligns with the GoB's position, as Bangladesh has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, which grants specific rights and protections to refugees under international law. Consequently, the Rohingyas in Bangladesh are denied a range of rights typically granted to refugees and outlined in international conventions, including the freedom of movement, formal employment rights, access to formal education¹⁾ and ability to obtain travel documents (Islam & Mia, 2024; Milton et al., 2017).

A suite of research has demonstrated multifaceted impacts on both refugee camps and host communities. In the camps, security issues including gender-based violence, drug trafficking, and gang violence, lead to a deteriorating situation for refugees and host communities (Hossain, 2021; Hossain et al., 2020; Win, 2023). For host communities, the influx has strained resources, depressed wages for unskilled labor, and contributed to rising crime rates and human trafficking concerns (Sakib, 2025). These issues are exacerbated by the ongoing conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine state, creating cross-border security dimensions (UNHCR, 2024b). The Bangladesh government has responded with various security measures, e.g. restricting refugee movement and increasing surveillance. The situation presents complex policy challenges, as the government attempts to balance security imperatives with humanitarian obligations while maintaining a strong stance on repatriation (Uppalet al., 2025).

The existing studies on Rohingya in Bangladesh predominantly explore the negative impacts but fail to explore how these issues can be improved by potential solutions. The dominant narrative limits the discourse to security risks and socio-economic burdens of Rohingyas, while leaving little room for investigating how both groups might coexist and prosper in the long term. The existing body of lit-

1) Nonformal education has been provided in some camps.

erature (Bashar, 2021; Hossain et al., 2020; Idrish & Khatun, 2018; Rahman, 2010; Rahman & Sakib, 2021) overwhelmingly emphasizes the negative impacts that the Rohingya refugee crisis has had on Bangladesh, while falling short of how these communities can overcome the situations. Negative social consequences include arms trafficking, drug trade, and extremist affiliations (Rahman, 2010), along with heightened strain on law enforcement and worsening social stability, particularly in regions such as Chittagong²⁾ (Rahman & Sakib, 2021). While these security concerns are valid, they often overshadow discussions of sustainable solutions for peaceful coexistence.

In contrast, another thread of literature has explored the way of co-existence of two groups. These discussions, however, are primarily based on personal opinions and may reflect a bias toward local perspectives due to the authors' Bangladeshi background. For example, while Siddiqi (2022) suggests ways to improve the situation after highlighting the negative impacts of the refugees, these suggestions are primarily based on challenges and dilemmas mentioned by two groups of interviewees, residents and Rohingyas. Based on these interviews, generalized conclusions were made for more social interaction and comprehensive refugee policy, without further details on how the host communities and refugees can live in harmony. Miah et al. (2024) provide valuable insights regarding social cohesion and reconciliation between the Rohingya and host communities using insights from surveying local households in Cox's Bazar and Rohingya. The research focuses on how the influx of Rohingya refugees has affected local livelihoods, education, and access to resources for the poorer segments of the host community, rather than a balanced portrayal of both groups. To address these gaps, this study aimed to gather more diverse views by also interviewing development practitioners.

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

1. Research Methodology

This research aims to examine the way of coexistence between Rohingya refugees and the host community. Accordingly, it addresses the following research

2) Chittagong is the mainland closest to the Bhasan Char Rohingya refugee camp, which is an isolated island.

question: What strategies can foster sustainable coexistence between Rohingya refugees and the host community in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh? For this purpose, interviews were conducted with experts or Rohingya themselves, working for Rohingya refugees in the Cox's Bazar camps.

The purposive sampling technique was utilized to carefully select participants who have direct experience or insightful knowledge. This method allows for the intentional selection of individuals based on specific criteria, such as direct humanitarian support to Rohingya. The interviewees include participants from various stakeholders, such as international organization officials, NGO workers, and Rohingya community leaders who are well-positioned to offer insights on how Rohingya refugee and host community may peacefully coexist. Semi-structured interviews of six experts or refugees were conducted from September to October of 2024. Upon the voluntary consent of the participants, interviews were conducted between the researcher and the research participant. Each interview took around 40 minutes. All interviews were carried out in English and were recorded and transcribed with the participants' consent. The interviews were conducted via Zoom. Follow-up interviews were conducted selectively with specific participants as needed to gather additional clarification and insights. The interview process was approved by the Seoul National University Institutional Review Board.³⁾

〈Table 1〉 presents a detailed breakdown of the interview participants involved in the study, categorized by nationality, job status and engagement duration with the crisis. A total of six participants were interviewed.

2. Theoretical Framework

Ager and Strang's integration framework (Ager & Strang, 2008) was used to analyze insights from these interviews. This integration framework, shown in 〈Figure 1〉, has been widely used by scholars to analyze how refugees and migrants may assimilate well in their host communities of different regions (Chen & Wang, 2015; Eby et al., 2011; Spaaij, 2012; Valenta & Bunar, 2010). Key domains of the framework indicate factors that influence successful integration and provides a struc-

3) Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, particular attention was paid to ethical considerations throughout the research process, ensuring confidentiality and respect for participants involved in survey of interview.

〈Table 1〉 Interview participants list

Expert	Nationality	Status	Engagement duration with Rohingya crisis (years)
1	Canadian	IO	2
2	Bangladeshi	IO	4
3	Bangladeshi	NGO	6
4	Bangladeshi	NGO	5
5	Rohingya	Supporting Research Institution	8
6	Rohingya	Supporting NGO	8

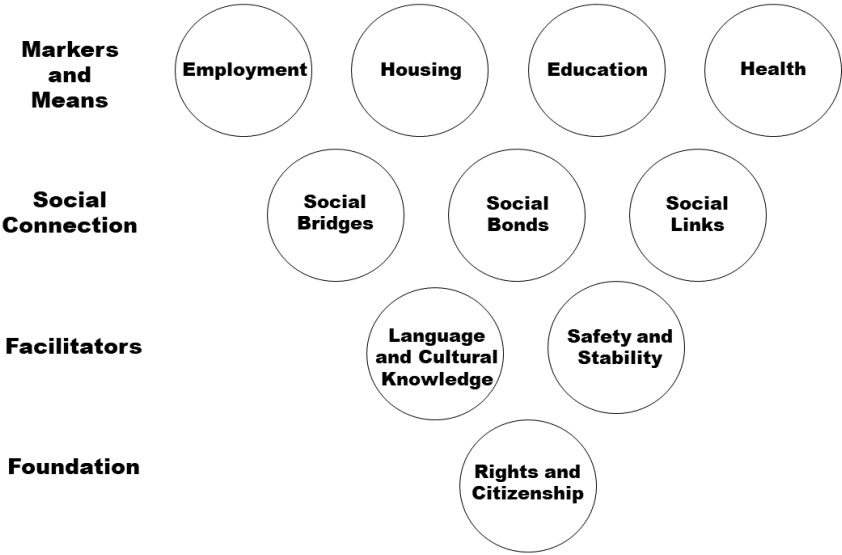
Note: IO, international organizations; NGOs, Non-Governmental Organizations.

tured approach for assessing how well refugees are integrating into a new society. Ten core domains are grouped into four key themes: markers and means, social connections, facilitators and foundations. The “Markers and Means” theme covers critical areas such as employment, housing, education, and health, which act both as indicators and enablers of integration. The “Social Connections” theme distinguishes between social bridges (relationships between refugees and host communities), social bonds (connections within refugee communities), and social links (connections to state institutions), highlighting the importance of relationships in fostering integration. The “Facilitators” theme addresses barriers such as language, cultural knowledge, safety, and stability, emphasizing their role in supporting or hindering integration. Lastly, the “Foundations” theme focuses on citizenship and rights, asserting that access to rights and responsibilities is fundamental for full societal participation.

Based on the integration framework, thematic analysis is used to organize raw data in a systematic manner, as done by previous scholars of migration (Dijk et al., 2022). This approach involves organizing raw data, such as interview transcripts, classifying recurring keywords identified across participants, and presenting the results based on emerging themes. Although the limited number of research participants gave challenges to fully applying thematic analysis, the researcher ensured that recurring issues raised by multiple participants (more than two or three times) were given significant consideration in the analysis.

Six steps of thematic analysis proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006) were followed: *Step 1. Familiarizing yourself with your data; Step 2. Generating initial codes; Step*

〈Figure 1〉 Integration framework for refugees.



Source: Ager & Strang (2008).

3. Searching for themes; Step 4. Reviewing themes; Step 5. Defining and naming themes; Step 6. Producing the report. After the interview, authors gathered all the interview scripts and read them repeatedly, to “familiarize myself with the data”. In the subsequent process, authors tried to identify some issues that commonly appeared throughout different interview contexts, such as “Make them economic contributors to Bangladesh (#Expert 1 and 5)”, “Improving health-care service is important for both groups (#Expert 2 and 5)”, “Cultural difference is barrier for the integration (#Expert 3, 4 and 6).”

IV. FINDINGS

1. Markers and Means

According to numerous studies, local perceptions of the Rohingya were initially marked by empathy following the massive influx of refugees in 2017, as the host community recognized the desperate situation of Rohingya (Ansar & Md. Khaled, 2021). However, as the refugee population grew, competition for essential re-

sources such as employment and healthcare became more pronounced, leading to frustration and resentment among the host community (Jerin & Mozumder, 2019; Sakib & Ananna, 2022). Several factors contributed to this shift in perception, with the most significant being employment challenges and limited access to healthcare. While environmental degradation and the concentration of humanitarian aid toward the Rohingya are noted as factors, the primary issues identified by the interviewees were centered around economic competition and strained healthcare services.

1) Employment

All interview participants emphasized the importance of “Markers and means”, particularly employment, education, and healthcare. Of these, employment was the most frequently highlighted concern. For example, Expert 2 stated, “Local wages have been driving down creating job competition.”

A critical step toward improving self-reliance within the camps involves creating sustainable opportunities for economic empowerment. One major barrier to achieving this is the legal restriction on employment for Rohingya refugees. Several experts pointed out that local poverty levels are still significant, and in some areas, the host population is worse off than the refugees in terms of nutrition and physical health. This disparity has led to feelings of jealousy and frustration, as noted by Expert 1 and Expert 2, particularly when locals see the Rohingya receiving international financial and material support that they themselves do not have access to.

“Some local pockets are worse than the refugees, also in terms of nutrition and physical situation. However, the Rohingya refugees get all the financial support while the host community doesn’t. I know it would be difficult, but I think there must be a way for the Rohingya to also contribute to the Bangladeshi economy. It’s not sustainable for the international community to feed them for so many years (Expert 1).”

Despite these challenges, the presence of Rohingya refugees has also brought economic opportunities to Cox’s Bazar. Many local workers have transitioned to

better-paid roles within NGOs and international agencies, creating a robust job market (Taufiq, 2021). Local Bangladeshi youth, previously struggling to find work, now benefit from employment opportunities requiring minimal education, supported by linguistic similarities that facilitate communication with refugees. Even individuals from Dhaka travel to Cox's Bazar seeking humanitarian work, further revitalizing the region's economy. Expert 3 stated, for example, "Cox's Bazar is now a big job marketplace. Bangladeshi can get a job from here."

To address these dynamics and foster economic integration, stakeholders should create sustainable pathways for Rohingya refugees to contribute to Bangladesh's economy. Initiatives such as supporting refugee-made goods or enabling collaboration with local farmers can serve as models for economic empowerment. Humanitarian organizations must continue enhancing local employment opportunities while advocating for policies that allow refugees to participate in the workforce legally. By aligning refugee contributions with local development goals, Bangladesh can transform Cox's Bazar into a hub of coexistence and mutual economic growth. This study conducted follow-up interviews and, before the conclusion, offered detailed suggestions for refugee inclusion in Bangladesh's development.

2) Education

A key element highlighted by several experts is the importance of awareness education targeted at the younger generation, both within the Rohingya and local Bangladeshi communities. Early intervention through education is seen as a good tool for reducing misconceptions and fostering empathy between the two groups. As Expert 4 noted, tensions between the Rohingya and the host community often arise from a lack of understanding and communication, which can be mitigated through educational initiatives that promote cultural awareness from a young age.

Education, when introduced early, can help dismantle stereotypes and reduce the fear and hostility that might otherwise develop between communities. By teaching children about each other's cultures, histories, and struggles, they are more likely to grow up with a sense of shared humanity and understanding, rather than suspicion or resentment.

Raising awareness is crucial to bridging divides between the Rohingya and host communities, as stereotypes and misconceptions hinder trust-building. Educational

programs and awareness campaigns targeting all age groups can improve mutual perceptions. Expert 6 emphasized that “education from a young age” is key to fostering cultural understanding, which should be integrated into school curriculum. This is particularly vital in Chittagong, where linguistic and religious similarities with the Rohingya exist, yet locals often fail to perceive them as part of their community (Expert 1). Early interventions that promote shared identity and belonging are essential.

In employment, refugees face stigma due to misconceptions about their productivity and potential, limiting their economic inclusion (Mahapatro & Gebauer, 2023). To address this, dual-focused educational efforts are needed: programs for locals to challenge stereotypes and foster empathy, and vocational training for refugees to enhance their skills and qualifications. These initiatives can demonstrate refugees’ contributions while preparing both groups for integration into a cohesive economic system. Investing in education that shifts local attitudes and empowers refugees is important to overcome the barriers to labor market inclusion.

3) Health

One of the key reasons behind the shift in local attitudes from initial sympathy to resentment is the limited access to healthcare services (Expert 2, 5). As the refugee population expanded in Cox’s Bazar, the pressure on local healthcare infrastructure intensified, making it increasingly difficult for both communities to receive adequate medical treatment. This competition for limited health resources exacerbated frustrations within the host community, which felt that their own healthcare needs were being pushed aside due to the presence of the refugees.

Several interviewees voiced concerns about the deteriorating access to health services since the arrival of the Rohingya. The Rohingya influx has led to unintended consequences in the host community’s healthcare access. The growing reliance of Rohingyas on local clinics has overburdened these facilities, resulting in long queues and reduced access for locals (The FinancialExpress, 2022). Existing basic services for refugees and host communities have been overwhelmed due to the sudden and massive increase in population (UNICEF, 2018). The high population density in the settlements has increased the risk of disease outbreaks and 1.2 million local people urgently require water and sanitation services (UNICEF,

2018). Most respondents employed in health-related institutions noted that the Rohingyas brought with them infectious diseases, such as diphtheria, cholera, and measles, which were virtually non-existent in Bangladesh (Hasan et al., 2024). To support large-scale immunization campaigns in both refugee camps and host communities, additional healthcare professionals were deployed from across the country. However, this reallocation of personnel resulted in 61.7% of entry-level physician positions nationwide remaining vacant, which negatively affected the provision of medical services in other regions (Hasan et al., 2024).

To address these challenges, experts suggested that instead of focusing solely on immediate humanitarian aid, there is a need to improve healthcare infrastructure in the region. Increased hospital capacity that serves both refugees and the host community would alleviate competition for resources (Expert 2, 5). Expert 5 commented, “Successful integration initiatives between Rohingya refugees and local Bangladeshi communities include community health programs that provide joint healthcare services, fostering collaboration in maternal and child health.”

The existing disparity in healthcare services is also evident in the separation of facilities. For example, while some hospitals, such as the National Hospital of Bangladesh and Ukiah Hospital, serve only local Bangladeshis, certain NGO-run health centers cater exclusively to the Rohingya population (Expert 2). However, there is also a program that provides healthcare to both communities. According to Hasan et al. (2024), some health facilities were restricted to Rohingya access only, but they have gradually been opened to host communities as well. Bridging this divide by creating more inclusive healthcare facilities would help balance the healthcare access issue and reduce the dissatisfaction of one group feeling favored over the other. For instance, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) operates outpatient clinics that offer services to both Rohingya refugees and local residents. Expanding such initiatives would help address the healthcare needs of both populations, reducing tensions and ensuring that no group feels neglected. In 2017, MSF initially focused on providing emergency medical services primarily for the Rohingya refugees, who were in urgent need of humanitarian assistance due to the scale of the crisis (MSF, 2023). Their immediate priorities were emergency healthcare, treatment of malnutrition, vaccinations, and care for survivors of sexual violence within the refugee camps. Over time, the needs of host communities became

clear with some voices, MSF extended its services to address the health needs of both populations (MSF, 2023). This model of shared healthcare provision could be a pathway to promoting social cohesion, as shared access to services make collaboration rather than competition.

To some extent, the Rohingya crisis also contributed to the improvement of healthcare infrastructure for the host community. Before the Rohingya influx, Cox's Bazar faced challenges with inadequate health infrastructure that affected the host population. Critical medical equipment and testing facilities were already in short supply. However, the focus group interviews conducted by Hasan et al. (2024) revealed that the Rohingya crisis prompted improvements in public health infrastructure. Despite the primary objective of providing healthcare services to the Rohingya minority, the host community has also experienced lasting benefits. Since the onset of Rohingya immigration, there has been a significant enhancement in overall health facilities in Cox's Bazar district. All respondents acknowledged that this improvement is directly tied to the Rohingya influx, and argued that it should also be recognized by the host community.

In addition to physical health, mental health has emerged as a critical area of concern. Both the refugees and the host community face significant stress, with many refugees suffering from trauma caused by the violence and displacement they endured. Expert 4 stated that "Their mental health is at risk, as they have experienced trauma during their escape from Myanmar." For example, Shantikana, a trauma-healing initiative run by Asian Dignity Initiative (ADI), offers psychosocial support to Rohingya refugees, with a focus on helping women recover emotionally and mentally from their experiences (ADI, 2024). The program also trains community members to sustain long-term mental health support within the camps, contributing to the broader goal of empowering survivors and fostering resilience. There is a growing recognition of the need for comprehensive mental health services, not just for refugees but for the host community as well. Expert 6 suggested that the integration of mental health services, legal aid, and advocacy efforts are needed to support the most vulnerable populations. Providing access to these services would not only address immediate mental health challenges but also contribute to social stability and reduce tensions between the two groups by promoting a sense of shared well-being.

2. Social Connections

Following ‘Markers and Means’, ‘Social Connections’ emerged as the second most frequently mentioned theme among interviewees. This category comprises three components: Social Bridges, referring to connections between different communities; Social Bonds, connection within communities; and Social Links, connections with institutions.

The first major factor contributing to the tension between the Rohingya refugees and the host community is the lack of cultural understanding and communication, as highlighted by Expert 3 and 4. The absence of meaningful dialogue makes further misconceptions. Creating a space for exchange between the Rohingya refugees and the host community plays a role in making mutual understanding and reducing social barriers which ultimately leads to the social connection. The activities below, which are proposed by the interviewees, would be helpful for promoting social connections. By engaging in these activities that allow both groups to share their traditions, customs, and histories, cultural exchange helps to break down stereotypes and misconceptions. For instance, cultural festivals where both Rohingya and residents participate together can provide opportunities for meaningful interactions, enabling both sides to celebrate their shared heritage while respecting their differences.

These events create a platform for dialogue and mutual appreciation, which are helpful for building long-term social cohesion. In addition to cultural festivals, joint community projects such as environmental clean-ups serve as practical avenues for collaboration between the two groups. Working together toward a common goal—such as improving the local environment—can help to make a sense of shared responsibility and build trust. These initiatives demonstrate that despite their differences, both communities are invested in the well-being of their shared space, promoting a stronger sense of community and cooperation. Sports activities also offer a way for younger generations from both communities to engage with one another in a positive and non-competitive environment. Shared participation in sports and service projects encourages teamwork, communication, and mutual respect, which are critical components of social integration. Religious activities provide another avenue for fostering social bonds. Since both the Rohingya and

local populations are predominantly Muslim, shared religious practices such as attending mosques together or celebrating Eid⁴⁾ together can strengthen social ties. Indeed, there are locals who prepare food during Eid and share it with the Rohingya (Expert 3). These collective religious experiences emphasize common values and shared beliefs, helping to reinforce a sense of unity and belonging. By engaging in these religious activities as a community, both groups can move beyond their differences to focus on their common faith and traditions. Community events that bring together Rohingya and local residents, such as farming or small-scale production projects, also provide opportunities for cooperation. When refugees and locals work together to produce goods or cultivate land, they not only contribute to the local economy but also establish a sense of interdependence. These joint ventures promote economic collaboration, which is essential for reducing competition over resources and fostering a more harmonious coexistence.

To underscore the significance of these engagement initiatives, this study presents the UNHCR H.O.P.E. Worldwide project in New Zealand as a compelling case study. It demonstrates the effectiveness of cultural exchange programs in fostering social connections between diverse communities (UNHCR, 2025). Key activities include cultural exchange events, workshops on cultural sensitivity, language exchange programs, and community dialogues, all aimed at promoting cultural understanding and integration. The project has resulted in significant improvements in the lives of refugees and their host communities, aligning with Objective 2 of the Global Compact on Refugees by enhancing refugee self-reliance (UNHCR, 2025).

Second, strong social bonds within refugee communities are crucial for addressing internal security challenges and making mutual support during the crisis. The importance of social bonds becomes undeniable in the face of natural disaster. The community-led disaster preparedness program has trained 3,000 Rohingya refugees to handle emergencies, with at least 20 volunteers (10 men and 10 women) assigned to each of the 30 camps (Rogers, n.d.). These trained community members are taking action such as conducting door-to-door awareness campaigns; using megaphones and sirens to spread emergency warnings; conducting rescue operations; and providing first aid to injured community members.

4) Eid is a big celebration event worldwide among Muslims, since it marks the end of the month-long-dawn to dusk fasting of Ramadan.

Internal community bonds also play a role in countering gang violence within camps. The presence of seven criminal gang networks in refugee camps has led to various illegal activities, including drug trafficking, abduction, and property theft (Das, 2023). Strong social bonds are crucial for building collective resilience against criminal activities through united community action. Creating support networks where community members share information about potential threats will be helpful to prevent gang violence (Expert 3).

Third, regular community meetings and co-decision making sessions, where both refugees and local representatives are included in decision-making processes, are another good tool for building social links. When both groups are equally involved in decisions that affect their lives, it helps to ensure that their voices are heard, reducing feelings of marginalization, and fostering a sense of inclusion. Expert 2 and 5 suggested having a community forum for refugees and locals to discuss issues together, indicating that such meetings could help build trust.

These institutional connections provide formal channels for voice and representation, though their effectiveness varies. The interview data suggests that strengthening these links is crucial for addressing systemic issues and ensuring equitable resource distribution. This governance approach can mitigate tensions by addressing the concerns of both sides in a balanced and equitable manner.

In conclusion, these various forms of interaction—whether through cultural exchange, religious practices, community-led initiative, shared decision-making—play a good role in creating the social connections necessary for peaceful coexistence between the Rohingya refugees and the host community. These activities not only help to bridge cultural gaps but also create a framework for collaboration, trust, and mutual respect, which are necessary for long-term integration and social stability.

3. Facilitators

The Facilitators dimension, as outlined by Ager and Strang's integration framework, comprises two key factors: Language & Cultural Knowledge and Safety & Stability. This framework distinguishes Facilitators from Social Connections based on the type of engagement involved. Social Connections emphasize relation-

ship-building through activities like cultural exchange and mingling, while Facilitators address the underlying mechanisms of cultural adaptation and other conditions essential for integration, such as language acquisition and the assurance of safety and stability.

In this study, however, none of the interviewees identified Facilitators—such as safety, stability, cultural adaptation, or language acquisition—as fundamental to fostering coexistence between Rohingya refugees and the host community. Instead, the interviewees emphasized the importance of cultural exchange, perceiving each group as distinct in ethnicity and identity, thus indicating that cultural adaptation was not seen as a viable or necessary pathway for coexistence. Regarding language acquisition, the Bangladeshi government prohibits the teaching of Bengali within refugee camps, due to concerns that language proficiency might enable Rohingya refugees to leave the camps unlawfully and assimilate as undocumented residents within Bangladesh, given the physical similarities between the groups.

Although it is widely acknowledged that a safe and stable environment is essential for the well-being of refugees, the interviewees primarily emphasized the role of direct social interactions, e.g., joint community activities and mutual understanding, to facilitate coexistence. This highlights the unique contextual distinction of Bangladesh, unlike other countries hosting refugees.

4. Foundation: Rights and Citizenship

One of the complex challenges of Rohingya integration is their rights and citizenship. Although more than two interviewees emphasized the importance of citizenship and rights for the Rohingya (Expert 1, 5), it is notable that these interviewees were not Bangladeshi, which may include a potential bias in having this perspective.

Other than the Rohingya, almost nobody has wanted to emigrate to Bangladesh, where there is a lack of structured immigration system as observed in more developed nations. The legal options to attain Bangladeshi citizenship are by marriage or if a parent is Bangladeshi. As such, there is no legal path to citizenship for immigrants or refugees as of now (Wazed, 2018).

Therefore, while the study's interviewees did mention citizenship and the corresponding rights of the Rohingya, the situation in Bangladesh—where citizenship is typically restricted to those with a direct familial tie to the country and no formal immigration system exists—shows that institutional support is nonexistent. Granting citizenship to nearly a million refugees poses a challenge on a different scale, compared to granting citizenship to a few individuals. As such, in terms of citizenship, further research including various stakeholders is needed.

V. DISCUSSION

Based on these results, three critical priorities have emerged for fostering sustainable coexistence. Employment is the foremost concern; experts emphasized in the interviews that creating economic opportunities can reduce tensions and promote long-term stability between the two communities. Healthcare access is identified as the second priority, encompassing both physical and mental health services. To prevent feelings of neglect and address concerns about resource allocation, healthcare must be distributed equitably in both communities, ensuring fair access for all. Finally, building social bridges through shared activities is seen as crucial for developing mutual understanding and trust. These three domains—employment, health, and social connections—represent the most pressing areas requiring immediate policy attention to ensure both communities can thrive together.

Expert interviews highlighted the overwhelming consensus that making Rohingya refugees economic contributors is a top priority for coexistence. In this regard, this section explores the potential for Rohingyas to be seen as economic contributors to Bangladesh, not as a burden. Building on existing research and follow-up interviews, this section aims to provide evidence of its feasibility and actionable recommendations for policymakers to create sustainable opportunities. To provide a systematic explanation, this section will be organized around three guiding questions: why, how, and what.

1. Why: Successful Cases for Refugees being Economic Contributors

The experiences of Ethiopia and Jordan, both hosting refugee populations comparable in size to Bangladesh, further illustrate the dynamics of large-scale refu-

gee integration. Ethiopia, with approximately 972,000 refugees and asylum seekers, has adopted progressive economic integration policies through the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (UNHCR, 2024c).

The 2019 Refugee Proclamation granted refugees the right to work and freedom of movement, leading to 90.9% of urban refugees achieving self-reliance (Hoogeveen & Hopper, 2024). Programs such as the Qualification and Employment Perspectives initiative have improved employability for both refugees and host community members (Binkert et al., 2021), while the development of industrial parks is expected to create 100,000 jobs, with 30% reserved for refugees (Nigusie, 2022). Beyond economic gains, Ethiopia's approach has generated mutual benefits: schools and healthcare centers established for refugees also serve residents and increased economic exchange has led to higher household incomes and improved social integration (Hoogeveen & Hopper, 2024).

Jordan, hosting around 710,000 refugees, has also demonstrated a commitment to refugee integration through the Jordan Compact, a comprehensive policy framework designed to improve refugee access to the labor market (Anera, 2024; Morris, 2020). Since its implementation in 2016, more than 230,000 work permits have been issued to refugees, significantly enhancing their economic participation (Istaiteyeh, 2025). The unemployment rate among Syrian refugees has dropped from 61% before the Compact to 25% after its implementation (World Bank, 2020). Furthermore, the labor market integration of refugees has stimulated consumer demand and increased labor force participation. This economic integration has also contributed to Jordan's export growth, with the number of EU-exporting companies increasing from two in 2017 to eleven in 2019 (Segnana et al., 2024). The inclusion of Syrian refugees in the manufacturing sector has played a crucial role in this expansion, demonstrating how refugee integration can create opportunities for national economic development.

These cases illustrate that refugee integration is not solely a humanitarian issue but also plays a significant role in advancing the economic development of host countries. However, Bangladesh continues to restrict Rohingya refugees from accessing formal employment, which increases dependency and limits their ability to contribute productively. Given the uncertainty surrounding repatriation, it may be prudent for Bangladesh to consider sustainable alternatives, starting with the creation of formal economic opportunities for refugees.

2. How: Overcoming Challenges of Economic Participation

Transforming Rohingyas into economic contributors requires addressing existing barriers and challenges. Since countries around the world have demonstrated how targeted policy reforms and innovative initiatives can enable refugees to contribute positively to local and national economies, Bangladesh also can draw lessons from local and global experiences.

UNHCR has launched its Global Appeal for 2025, seeking \$10.248 billion to address the needs of an unprecedented 139.3 million forcibly displaced and stateless individuals worldwide. Under these circumstances, it is challenging for international organizations to maintain dignified living conditions for refugees. In this context, collaboration with the private sector emerges as a feasible pathway to address these gaps (Expert 2, 5, 6). This study argues that private sector engagement may serve as a key partner for innovation and sustainability in the refugee crisis. For instance, initiatives like Microsoft's Apprenticeship Factory in Malawi offer a compelling model. This program integrated refugees into high-skill industries through technology and training, empowering them to contribute to host economies while acquiring job skills (Msowoya, 2019).

Even Bangladesh has experienced a public-private partnership. Euglena, a Japanese biotechnology company, partnered with World Food Programme (WFP) to develop a sustainable model for humanitarian assistance. Euglena leveraged its existing mung bean cultivation projects and nutritional support programs to create a positive impact. Through this partnership, 2,000 farmers received technical training in mung bean cultivation, with Euglena guaranteeing the purchase of their harvests. Concurrently, mung beans were introduced into refugee camps, providing culturally familiar and nutritious food for Rohingyas. A Rohingya refugee said when the test sale started: "I'm happy to eat mung beans like I did before I evacuated here (Euglena, 2019)." The initiative, backed by \$2 million in funding over two years, addressed immediate food security needs while strengthening local agricultural markets and promoting economic resilience.

This case shows the feasibility of private sector engagement in addressing humanitarian challenges, demonstrating how business innovation can complement public and international efforts to create sustainable and scalable solutions. These

examples—structured condition and private sector engagement—illustrate that providing refugees with economic opportunities is a feasible and effective way to harness their potential. Adopting an appropriate model in the Bangladesh context can create opportunities for Rohingya refugees to participate in the economy. Such approaches can unlock new opportunities for collaboration, foster self-reliance, and support sustainable development for both refugees and host communities.

3. What: Sectors for Economic Contribution

There are some challenges unique to Bangladesh. Due to its limited land resources, some economic activities like farming are less feasible in Bangladesh, as both the refugee camps and host communities are densely populated. Currently, economic opportunities are largely confined to small-scale activities such as tailoring, handicrafts, and day labor in the camp. These jobs are often insufficient for sustainable livelihoods and are heavily influenced by cultural norms that limit female participation (Filipski et al., 2020). Then what work opportunities might be suitable for Rohingya refugees in overcrowded Bangladesh?

Sun et al. (2019) conducted research involving interviews with over 50 businesses, technical experts, and government officials, identifying several key sectors as particularly promising for the Rohingya and host community. Investment and sourcing economic opportunities in Cox's Bazar are diverse, spanning clean energy, seafood, and handicrafts.

Cox's Bazar holds strong potential for renewable energy investments, especially in solar and wind power. The area's geography and availability of marginal land make it suitable for solar farms, which are otherwise challenging to establish in Bangladesh due to competing land uses for agriculture and urban development (Saifullah et al., 2016). Government initiatives, such as the Wind Energy Study Project, have confirmed the commercial viability of wind energy in the region (Jacobson et al., 2018). Furthermore, tenders for renewable energy projects are actively being conducted, presenting opportunities for global investors to collaborate with local firms like Joules Power Limited, which already operates Bangladesh's first utility-scale solar farm in the area. These investments could also link with humanitarian projects within refugee camps that train locals and refugees in solar

panel installation and maintenance (Boisson, 2019). Such initiatives not only support Bangladesh's goal of achieving 30% renewable energy by 2041 (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 2018) but also offer pathways for refugees to gain skills that may be valuable upon repatriation.

The seafood industry in Cox's Bazar is another area of potential. Despite its natural resources, aquaculture production currently reaches only 15% of its capacity (FAO, n.d.). Investments in improving infrastructure, introducing advanced production methods, and scaling up existing initiatives by refugees and locals could significantly boost yields. For example, the shrimp industry, which operates on a government-designated 2,425-hectare zone, produces far below its potential due to outdated methods and poor infrastructure. Modernizing this zone could raise productivity dramatically, with pilot projects already estimating the necessary investments for scaling up (Fami, 2019). Jobs created through these new enterprises could be shared between the local host community and refugees. Amongst both, there are long traditions of fishing and seafood production, so enterprises will have an available pool of local workers with experience in these industries (Sun et al., 2019).

Finally, the handicrafts and textiles sector, rooted in the traditional skills of the Rohingya community, offers another opportunity. Skill training programs within refugee camps are helping to revive crafts such as embroidery and woodwork, which not only provide income but also play a role in trauma recovery (Gluck, 2019). Currently, the goods produced by Rohingya women have no sizable market outlet. If an international buyer would source their production in a manner that ensures decent working conditions, it would provide a significant boost to refugee incomes and the sustainability of these critical skills and trauma recovery programs (Sun et al., 2019). Partnering with organizations like BRAC's Aarong⁵⁾ social enterprise could enable international buyers to source quality goods while ensuring ethical labor practices.

By adapting similar strategies, Bangladesh could turn the Rohingya crisis into an opportunity for shared economic growth. While concerns about exploitation, re-

5) Aarong (Bengali: আড়, lit. 'Village Fair') is a social enterprise chain of Bangladeshi department stores specializing in Bengali ethnic wear and handicrafts. It is owned by the non-profit development agency BRAC, and employs thousands of rural artisans across the country. It currently operates twenty-nine outlets in nine Bangladeshi metropolitan cities.

source competition, and the sustainability of private sector-led approaches are valid, they should not preclude efforts to explore such opportunities in practice. Creating economic opportunities for refugees, even if implemented in a restricted or incremental manner, may ensure the dignity of both refugees and host communities amid limited resources and constrained international assistance.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study highlights three critical areas based on the frequency and emphasis in thematic terms: Employment, Health, and Social bridges. Given the constrained resources and heightened tensions within Cox's Bazar, policymakers can focus on these top three domains to create a more stable relationship between the two communities. This prioritization not only addresses immediate challenges but also considers long-term social stability and resilience.

Building on the integration framework proposed by Ager & Strang (2008), which offers a structured understanding of how refugees can be incorporated into host communities, this study emphasizes the importance of aligning integration efforts with tangible benefits for host community. In the context of Bangladesh, where resource constraints and social tensions are already high, efforts to foster sustainable coexistence must be grounded in demonstrable benefits for local populations. This study responds to that need by illustrating how refugee economic inclusion can enhance the well-being of host communities. It demonstrates the possibility for mutual benefits and argues that the room for these opportunities should be expanded. For instance, humanitarian operations have already generated employment opportunities both for small holder farmer level and humanitarian worker itself for Bangladeshi nationals. Additionally, infrastructure and services such as shared health facilities have improved service delivery for both groups. Moreover, examples from Ethiopia and Jordan show how inclusive economic policies can attract international investment, boost exports, and foster innovation, with host communities as direct beneficiaries. These outcomes demonstrate that refugee inclusion, when designed strategically, is not a zero-sum scenario but rather a development multiplier that advances social cohesion, reduces long-term dependency, and promotes economic resilience for both refugees and hosts alike.

Employment emerges as the top priority among all factors, with experts consistently highlighting its importance in fostering stability and reducing conflict between the Rohingya and the host community. Expanding economic opportunities for refugees can help stabilize local wages and ease competition for scarce resources, thereby cultivating a shared sense of purpose. Analysis indicates that ensuring equal access to job opportunities—such as implementing “half-half” participation quotas in employment programs run by NGOs or international organizations can address concerns about economic imbalance and perceptions of favoritism. Conditional job offers and private sector engagement are identified as promising strategies for transforming the Rohingya refugee situation in Bangladesh, particularly in sectors like renewable energy, seafood, and handicrafts. Drawing on structured approaches from Jordan and Ethiopia, Bangladesh could establish regulated frameworks that enable refugee economic participation. Moving forward, it will be essential to balance regulatory requirements with the expansion of economic opportunities, ensuring that both refugees and host communities benefit from development initiatives that promote dignity, self-reliance, and shared prosperity.

Health emerges as the next priority, with both physical and mental health identified as key concerns. Experts emphasize that healthcare services should be accessible to both refugees and host communities to prevent feelings of neglect and perceptions of unfairness. While most funding is currently directed toward emergency relief for refugees, allocating resources to integrated, community-wide health services could contribute equitable access and ease pressure on local health systems. The national priority on a specific health issue, such as large-scale immunization, negatively affected the access to health services for both refugees and residents. Yet, the example of outpatient clinics run by MSF to serve both groups present an example of expansion of services that contribute to improved access to healthcare, despite the presence of refugees. Investing in durable healthcare solutions is essential for strengthening the mental well-being of host communities, who are disproportionately affected by the broader socioeconomic fallout of the refugee crisis. More equitable access to healthcare services can serve as a catalyst for improved intergroup relations and more stable society.

The final priority is the need to strengthen social bridges between locals and refugees. Promoting social cohesion is essential, and several interviewees emphasized that shared activities are key to building trust and understanding. Social events—such as religious ceremonies, community gatherings, or collaborative projects—can foster mutual respect and facilitate meaningful interactions. Ensuring equal participation from both groups in these activities can help them see each other as partners within a shared community, thereby reinforcing positive inter-group relations.

While immediate humanitarian measures such as in-kind contributions and financial aid offer vital short-term relief, long-term stability requires a more sustainable strategy. With the growing recognition that rapid repatriation is no longer a feasible solution, it is time to explore sustainable models of coexistence. Implementing solutions that create employment opportunities for refugees, strengthen healthcare services, and foster platforms for social interaction would not only alleviate pressure on local resources but also enhance the quality of life for both host communities and refugees. By prioritizing shared participation and equitable resource allocation, policymakers can establish an inclusive and balanced framework that ensures relevance and fairness. Focusing on employment, health, and social connections as central pillars will lay the foundation for both communities to live and thrive together in a harmonious and resilient Bangladesh.

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