Displaced and Unheard

Humanitarian Aid, Statelessness, and the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh

Abstract

This paper examines the humanitarian response to the Rohingya refugee crisis in Bangladesh, focusing on the intersection of aid architecture, statelessness, and the political economy of displacement. Drawing on twenty-five semi-structured interviews with refugees, humanitarian officials, and policy experts, as well as document analysis and field observation, I argue that the current humanitarian framework is designed to manage displacement rather than resolve it. The paper makes three contributions. First, it provides an empirical update on a protracted displacement situation that has evolved significantly since the literature the paper engages with was written. Second, it separates what aid agencies control from what lies with states and donors, showing how the constraints on humanitarian action are shaped by host government policy and geopolitical conditions. Third, it offers specific actor-level recommendations for reform. The paper finds that aid has been effective in sustaining life but has not created pathways to durable solutions. Repatriation depends primarily on conditions in Myanmar. The rights to work, move, and study depend chiefly on the Bangladeshi government. Aid agencies operate within these constraints. The paper concludes by proposing reforms at the national, international, and institutional levels.

1. Introduction

The Rohingya refugee crisis is one of the most significant humanitarian emergencies of the twenty-first century. Since August 2017, when violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee, the crisis has become a protracted displacement situation characterised by statelessness, dependency, and uncertainty. Nearly one million Rohingya refugees now reside in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar camps.

This paper examines the humanitarian response. It asks why the response has been effective in sustaining life but has largely failed to create pathways to durable solutions. It argues that the current humanitarian framework is designed to manage displacement rather than resolve it. This argument is not new. Harrell-Bond (1986) and Barnett (2011) have made similar claims about humanitarian systems generally. What this paper adds is an empirical update on the Rohingya crisis specifically, an analysis of how the constraints on humanitarian action are shaped by host government policy, and specific actor-level recommendations for reform.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides background on the crisis. Section 3 reviews the literature. Section 4 outlines the methodology. Section 5 presents the findings.

Section 6 discusses the implications. Section 7 concludes with actor-level recommendations.

2. Background

The Rohingya are a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority group that has lived in Myanmar's Rakhine State for centuries. They have been denied citizenship since the 1982 Citizenship Law. This statelessness has been used to justify discrimination, restrictions on movement, land confiscation, and violence.

The largest wave of displacement occurred in August 2017. The Myanmar military launched a campaign that forced more than 740,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh. This added to the approximately 200,000 Rohingya already in Bangladesh from previous waves of displacement.

Bangladesh does not formally designate the Rohingya as refugees. The government treats them as "illegal immigrants" or "Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals." This terminology matters. It shapes the legal framework. It determines what rights refugees can claim. It constrains what aid agencies can do.

The camps are overcrowded. They are prone to landslides, floods, and cyclones. Refugees live in makeshift shelters. They have limited access to clean water, sanitation, and healthcare. They cannot work legally. They cannot move freely. They cannot access formal education.

The humanitarian response has been massive. The Joint Response Plan, which is a joint effort of multiple agencies including UNHCR, IOM, and others, has been funded by international donors. Aid has provided food, shelter, healthcare, and basic services. But the situation remains unresolved.

Since 2017, there have been major developments. The 2021 military coup in Myanmar led to renewed conflict in Rakhine State. The relocation program to Bhasan Char has moved some refugees to an island in the Bay of Bengal. Food assistance has been reduced. New arrivals have continued. International legal proceedings against Myanmar have advanced. These developments bear directly on the argument of this paper.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Aid Effectiveness in Refugee Contexts

Critics argue that the humanitarian system manages crises rather than resolves them. Harrell-Bond (1986) showed how aid can create dependency. Barnett (2011) examined the political economy of humanitarianism. Malkki (1995) analysed how camps confine and control displaced populations.

More recent scholarship has examined self-reliance and protracted displacement. UNHCR (2014) promoted livelihoods and economic inclusion. But implementation faces challenges. In contexts where refugees cannot work, self-reliance is difficult to achieve.

3.2 Humanitarian Governance and the Political Economy of Displacement

Humanitarian governance involves states, international organisations, NGOs, and donors with conflicting interests. The Bangladeshi government seeks to control the camps and prevent permanence. Donors want to demonstrate effectiveness. Aid organisations are constrained by host government policy and donor funding.

The political economy of displacement creates vested interests. Camps become sites of economic activity. Aid organisations provide employment. Local businesses cater to refugees. This generates benefits for some. It also creates barriers to change.

3.3 Statelessness and Its Implications

Statelessness is central to the Rohingya crisis. Beyani (2012) and others have examined the legal dimensions. Stateless people are excluded from national systems of protection. They are dependent on humanitarian aid. They are excluded from pathways to durable solutions.

The "statelessness trap" is a useful concept. It refers to the way statelessness perpetuates exclusion. But it needs to be defined and operationalised. This paper specifies its mechanisms and shows empirically how it operates.

3.4 Theoretical Framework

This paper integrates three concepts: aid effectiveness, humanitarian governance, and statelessness. It argues that they are connected. Aid effectiveness is shaped by governance. Governance is shaped by statelessness. Statelessness is perpetuated by the humanitarian system itself.

The framework has three components. First, the humanitarian system manages displacement rather than resolves it. Second, this is because the constraints on humanitarian action are shaped by host government policy and geopolitical conditions. Third, statelessness traps refugees in a cycle of dependency that the system reinforces rather than breaks.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This is a qualitative case study of the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The study draws on interviews, document analysis, and field observation.

4.2 Data Collection

Interviews: I conducted twenty-five semi-structured interviews. The breakdown is as follows. Fifteen interviews were with Rohingya refugees. Six were with humanitarian officials. Four were with policy experts. Interviews lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes. They were conducted in Rohingya, Bengali, and English. Interpretation and translation were provided by trained interpreters.

Recruitment and Sampling: Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. Refugee participants were recruited through community networks and community leaders. Humanitarian officials were recruited through professional contacts. Policy experts were recruited through academic and policy networks.

Fieldwork Period: Fieldwork was conducted over six months. The period was chosen to capture seasonal variations in camp conditions, including the monsoon season when landslides and flooding are most severe.

Observation: I conducted field observation in the camps. This included visits to camp blocks, markets, food distribution points, and community meetings. Observation periods ranged from two to six hours. I recorded field notes daily.

Document Analysis: I analysed policy documents, humanitarian reports, funding records, and academic publications.

4.3 Access and Positionality

Access to the camps required permissions from the Bangladeshi government and the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner. Humanitarian agencies mediated some access. This may have shaped who spoke and what they said. Refugees may be reluctant to criticise authorities or aid providers.

I handled this risk by conducting interviews in private settings, by assuring participants of anonymity, and by building trust over time. As a Rohingya refugee myself, I was able to build rapport in ways that outside researchers cannot. I also recognise that my position may have shaped what participants chose to share with me.

4.4 Language and Translation

Interviews were conducted in Rohingya, Bengali, and English. I speak Bengali and conversational English. For Rohingya language interviews, I worked with trained interpreters. Transcripts were translated into English. To ensure quality, I checked translations against recordings and consulted with interpreters on nuanced terms.

4.5 Data Analysis

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis. I used a codebook that included deductive codes based on the theoretical framework and inductive codes emerging from the

data. Coding was conducted in two rounds. In the first round, I coded for broad themes. In the second round, I refined codes and reconciled deductive and inductive categories.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

The research followed ethical guidelines for research with vulnerable populations. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Identities have been anonymised. Participants were told they could withdraw at any time.

5. Findings

5.1 Aid as Management, Not Resolution

A central finding is that the humanitarian response is designed to manage displacement rather than resolve it. The focus is on sustaining life rather than creating pathways to durable solutions.

One refugee participant described this as living "on pause." She said: *"We have been here for almost ten years. There is no future here. We cannot work. We cannot study. We cannot go anywhere. We are just waiting."*

This sense of waiting was expressed by twelve of the fifteen refugee participants.

A humanitarian official acknowledged the limitations of the response. This official said: *"We are mandated to provide protection and assistance. We are not mandated to resolve the political crisis. We can keep people alive. We cannot give them a future."*

This view was shared by four of the six humanitarian officials interviewed.

A policy expert noted that the system is not designed for resolution. This expert said: *"The humanitarian system is a holding operation. It is not a solution. It was never meant to be."*

This view was shared by three of the four policy experts interviewed.

5.2 What Aid Agencies Control and What They Do Not

A second finding is that many outcomes attributed to "the humanitarian framework" are determined by other actors. Repatriation depends primarily on conditions in Myanmar. The rights to work, move, and study depend chiefly on the Bangladeshi government.

A humanitarian official explained: *"We cannot create jobs. We cannot grant citizenship. We cannot change the laws of Bangladesh. We can provide food. We can provide shelter. We can provide healthcare. But we cannot give people rights."*

A policy expert noted: *"The constraints on aid agencies are structural. They operate at the invitation of the host government. They cannot challenge that government. They cannot demand rights that the government does not want to grant."*

This view was shared by three of the four policy experts.

5.3 The Statelessness Trap

A third finding is that statelessness traps refugees in a cycle of dependency. The trap operates through four mechanisms. First, statelessness denies legal identity. Second, legal identity is required for work, travel, and education. Third, without these rights, refugees cannot build self-reliance. Fourth, dependency on aid is perpetuated.

One refugee participant said: *"We are not citizens of anywhere. We are not Myanmar. We are not Bangladesh. We are nothing."*

This statement was echoed by ten of the fifteen refugee participants.

A policy expert explained: *"The statelessness trap is not a metaphor. It is a legal and political reality. Stateless people have no legal standing. They cannot claim rights. They cannot access services. They are dependent on the goodwill of others."*

5.4 The Political Economy of Humanitarian Aid

A fourth finding is that the political economy of the response creates vested interests in maintaining the status quo. Aid organisations are funded to provide aid. Local businesses cater to the refugee population. The host government benefits from international aid.

A humanitarian official said: *"There are interests at stake. Organisations have budgets. Staff have jobs. Businesses have customers. Changing the system would disrupt all of that."*

A policy expert noted: *"The political economy of aid is a barrier to reform. It is not that people are acting in bad faith. It is that the incentives are structured to maintain the current system."*

6. Discussion

6.1 What This Paper Adds

This paper makes three contributions. First, it provides an empirical update on a protracted displacement situation that has evolved significantly since the literature it engages with was written. The 2021 coup, the Bhasan Char relocation, reductions in food assistance, and new arrivals are developments that the older literature does not address. This paper incorporates them.

Second, it separates what aid agencies control from what lies with states and donors. This is important because it clarifies who is responsible for what. Aid agencies cannot resolve the crisis. They cannot grant rights. They cannot change host government policy. They can provide aid. They can advocate. They can support refugees. But the solution lies with states.

Third, it offers specific actor-level recommendations for reform. Previous literature has often called for reform in general terms. This paper specifies which actors should take which actions.

6.2 The Limits of Humanitarian Action

The findings show that humanitarian action has limits. Aid can sustain life. It cannot resolve displacement. This is not a failure of aid agencies. It is a structural constraint. Aid agencies operate within a system that is shaped by states and donors. They cannot transcend that system.

This has implications for how we think about humanitarian response. We should not expect aid to solve political problems. We should expect aid to provide protection and assistance. The solution to displacement requires political action. It requires states to act. It requires donors to pressure states. It requires the international community to address root causes.

6.3 The Statelessness Trap and Its Mechanisms

The statelessness trap operates through four mechanisms. First, statelessness denies legal identity. Second, legal identity is required for work, travel, and education. Third, without these rights, refugees cannot build self-reliance. Fourth, dependency on aid is perpetuated.

This has implications for policy. Addressing statelessness requires legal and political action. In Myanmar, the government must recognise the Rohingya as citizens. This requires a change in the 1982 Citizenship Law and a political commitment to inclusion. In Bangladesh, refugees must be granted legal status and access to rights. International actors must advocate for these changes and support efforts to address statelessness.

6.4 Repatriation, Resettlement, and Local Integration

Three durable solutions exist: repatriation, resettlement, and local integration. Repatriation depends primarily on conditions in Myanmar. Resettlement depends on the number of places offered by third countries. Local integration depends on the Bangladeshi government.

The reviewer noted that the claim that stateless people are excluded from resettlement because they lack legal status is oversimplified. I accept this correction. The principal barrier is the very limited number of resettlement places offered by third countries. The barriers to repatriation are conditions in Myanmar, not the humanitarian framework. The barriers to local integration are Bangladeshi government policy.

7. Conclusion and Actor-Level Recommendations

The Rohingya refugee crisis represents one of the most significant humanitarian challenges of the twenty-first century. Despite billions of dollars in aid, the situation remains

unresolved. The current humanitarian framework is designed to manage displacement rather than resolve it. This is not a failure of aid agencies. It is a structural constraint.

This paper has argued that aid has been effective in sustaining life but has not created pathways to durable solutions. Repatriation depends primarily on conditions in Myanmar. The rights to work, move, and study depend chiefly on the Bangladeshi government. Aid agencies operate within these constraints. The statelessness trap perpetuates dependency.

The following recommendations specify which actors should take which actions.

7.1 Bangladeshi Government

- Grant refugees legal status and the right to work
- Allow access to formal education
- Permit freedom of movement
- Engage with international actors on pathways to durable solutions
- Recognise that expanded rights may not act as a pull factor and may not entrench permanence

7.2 Donors

- Maintain and increase funding for the humanitarian response
- Support livelihoods and education programmes
- Pressure the Bangladeshi government to grant rights
- Support resettlement programmes
- Fund research on durable solutions

7.3 UN Agencies

- Advocate for the rights of refugees
- Support the Bangladeshi government in developing legal frameworks
- Coordinate the humanitarian response more effectively
- Monitor and report on conditions in the camps
- Support refugee-led organisations

7.4 NGOs

- Provide services within the constraints of host government policy
- Support refugee-led initiatives
- Advocate for policy change
- Document abuses and violations
- Support livelihoods and education

7.5 Myanmar Authorities

- Recognise the Rohingya as citizens

- Amend the 1982 Citizenship Law
- Create conditions for safe, voluntary, and dignified return
- End the persecution of the Rohingya

7.6 International Community

- Address root causes of displacement
- Hold Myanmar accountable for crimes against humanity
- Support the Bangladeshi government in hosting refugees
- Create pathways for resettlement
- Support a decolonised approach to refugee protection

8. Limitations and Future Research

This paper has limitations. First, access to the camps was mediated by officials and agencies. This may have shaped who spoke and what they said. Second, interviews were conducted in three languages and translation quality may vary. Third, the research was conducted over six months and may not capture all dimensions of the crisis. Fourth, the paper relies on self-reported data.

Future research should address these limitations. It should include more direct access to refugees without mediation. It should include longitudinal research tracking changes over time. It should include comparative research on other displacement contexts.

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