

*Understanding relationship between host community and
refugees: A case study of brewing environmental conflict
in the Cox's Bazar Rohingya camps*

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Introduction

With the decline of the Cold War, attention towards 'environmental conflicts' was well merited and now it is being fruitful in understanding the study of how environmental degradation acts as an agent in international and civil conflicts. The case of Cox's Bazar is no different, the influx of Rohingya is adversely affecting the livelihood of the host community due to deforestation, inflation and competition over. Although national and international humanitarian agencies are providing services and creating opportunities for the local population along with the Rohingyas, resources appear relatively scarce compared to the scale of needs which in long term might turn into an adverse situation creating hostile conflict between the host community and the rohingya refugees.

Defining environmental conflict

Environmental conflict can be broadly understood as a social conflict relating to the environment. It can be a conflict over the environment, most notably in terms of access to and control over environmental resources. These so-called "resource conflicts" are defined by Elen Turner as consisting of "social conflict (violent or nonviolent) associated with both struggles to gain access to natural resources and struggles resulting from the use of natural resources." From

a neo-Malthusian perspective, environmental conflicts also consist of conflicts resulting from environmental processes – especially resource scarcity supposedly putting strains on social relations – even if the conflict per se is not over those “scarce” environmental resources. It rather generates from unequal distribution of those resources (Billon, 2015).

Theoretical approach into understanding how host communities and refugees might indulge in environmental conflict

How does environmental degradation lead to violent conflicts?

Homer-Dixon's (1999) argument that where environmental change contributes to conflict development, it does so through indirect mechanisms such as host of social, cultural and economic variables. Competition for resources can be mapped onto existing perceptions of inequality, resulting in a hardening of group identities and providing a catalyst for hostility towards out-groups. Research in the political economy of natural disasters finds that sudden environmental stress can, under certain social conditions, be a catalyst for deepening social segmentation and intensified intergroup competition and conflict. The social psychology of intergroup conflict suggests that communities become more deeply segmented under conditions that foster perceptions of relative deprivation and threats to self-esteem which can be accelerated by resource degradation and uneven distribution of it (Billon, 2015).

How relationship between the host community and refugees deteriorates

The presence of refugees can create tensions and conflicts with host communities for a number of reasons.

- **First**, refugees are often well served by humanitarian agencies and enjoy better access to water, food, health and education than the host population (OECD 2001). (MARTIN, 2005)
- **Second**, The OECD (2001) has argued that the economic benefits generated by refugees ‘seldom outweigh the negative impacts of a large-scale refugee presence over extended periods’. In some contexts the host community can benefit, but the economic rewards can be confined to a small group of elites.
- **Third**, the presence of refugees can lead to environmental degradation, putting a strain on local resources such as water and firewood. Martin (2005) stresses that although

environmental degradation is often cited as an important factor in refugee-host relations, in many cases these issues are instrumentalised by political leaders.

- **Fourth**, host communities may be opposed to the presence of refugees on social or cultural grounds (OECD 2001).
- **Fifth**, refugees may be seen to pose a threat to the security of host communities by harbouring fighters or by increasing criminality. More broadly, there is some evidence to suggest that the presence of refugees may increase the risk of intrastate conflict (MARTIN, 2005).

A case study on the host community - Rohingya relationship

However, studies exploring descriptive details regarding attitudes, beliefs and perceptions towards refugees are generally very limited and this is especially true for the case of the Rohingya refugees. A large-scale survey exploring perception and experience of the host community regarding the Rohingya population was conducted by Xchange Foundation (2018) (Walton, 2012). Participants were found feeling unsafe (85%) about the Rohingya residing nearby, reluctant (85%) to allow the Rohingya children to go to the same school used by their children and prohibitive (48%) regarding the Rohingya accessing local facilities. The local people also face multi-dimensional problems due to the Rohingya crisis. Most of them used to graze their cattle in the fields, which are now occupied by the Rohingya people) (Jerin, 2019). The local people often feel insecure and do not know what they would do if the Rohingya refugees become violent. The Rohingya refugees often try to enter local villages. The local people used to enjoy many facilities such as free medical check-up and healthcare, stipend, and counselling provided by different NGOs and international agencies. But the termination of such services after the crisis began made the local people resentful of the Rohingya presence (Jerin, 2019). The coronavirus pandemic is aggravating tensions between Rohingya refugees and local communities in Bangladesh, underscoring long-held grievances on the margins of the massive aid response. Increasingly, distrust and stigmatisation have been aimed at Rohingya refugees accused of carrying the virus. Aid groups report a rise in anti-Rohingya hate speech and racism, as well as “rapidly deteriorating security dynamics” between the two communities (Anas, 2020). Distrust is also aimed at aid groups perceived to be favouring the Rohingya at the expense of local communities. “They don’t care about local people. Some local aid staff working on the refugee response echo similar beliefs. ((Babu), 2020)

Analysts say the tensions reflect growing resentment among the local communities, who have lived in the shadows of the refugee response for years which increased rapidly in 2017.

The influx of refugees and the enormous aid infrastructure has raised prices and sent wages plummeting, while locals say they haven't benefited enough from hundreds of millions of dollars earmarked for the Rohingya response each year. ((Babu), 2020)

"They feel like their lands and opportunities have now been permanently lost due to refugees," said MA Razzaque, who directs research at the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh (PRI) . "If we can eat a meal, we can't have another. The Rohingya families get gas, but we struggle to find firewood." Also driving animosity is the perception that aid is plentiful for refugees, but scant for local communities. The Rohingya crisis resulted in significant differences in the tourism sector the tourist attractions and hotel and restaurant businesses in Cox's Bazar and along the border with Myanmar were affected adversely due to fewer tourist arrivals since the beginnings of the Rohingya crisis and widespread publicity about problems in the area (Panday2004, pp. 100-101). Maystadt and Verwimp (2009) state that the economic structure, agriculture sector and local livelihoods can be affected by the presence of refugees, particularly in large numbers, because of competition in the labour market and increased price of daily goods ((Babu), 2020).

Conclusion

While local community members are generally sympathetic to the plight of the newcomers, there is growing anxiety of being "outnumbered" by foreigners in one's own land. This sense of vulnerability is going to become more and more complex as time goes by. These are the issues that the government will have to deal with sooner than later. And the international community will have to do more than just pay lip service about what a grand job the Bangladesh government is doing to host such a huge refugee populace. It is not merely a question of cents and dollars. Rather, the longer the Rohingyas stay on Bangladeshi soil, the greater will be the dangers of conflict erupting between Bangladeshis and Rohingyas.

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