

ROHINGYA REFUGEE REALITIES:

REPORT FROM CONSULTATIONS WITH REFUGEE-LED ORGANISATIONS

October 2020

Between August and September 2020, the <u>Asia Pacific Network of Refugees</u> (APNOR) in collaboration with representatives of Rohingya refugee-led organisations (RLOs) convened a series of consultations to document the challenges, opportunities and ways forward in strengthening responses to the complex challenges facing Rohingya refugees in the Asia Pacific region.

The following report provides an overview of this consultation process: how it was facilitated, who it involved, what was discussed, and the key themes and actions identified through this process. This report is intended as a record for those involved to be used in planning, prioritising and strengthening collaboration, as well as for external stakeholders wanting to understand how RLOs are working to address the challenges facing their own communities, and how they can support Rohingya RLOs in this work.

THE PROCESS

This consultation process involved a number of different stages and medium, some of which reflected the challenges of facilitating a community consultation process in the context of a large, diverse and dispersed population, lack of infrastructure and access to internet, and restrictions on face-to-face meeting associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

This process demonstrated that consultation is possible even in very difficult circumstances, and requires a commitment to finding accessible ways to bring people together and ample time and flexibility to engage diverse groups in a process leading to collaborative outcomes. Importantly, the findings of this consultation highlighted the significance given by Rohingya RLOs to meaningful consultation processes that engage communities respectfully, inform outcomes, and pave the way for ongoing and collaborative relationships.

The main stages included:

- Developing a contact database of Rohingya leaders and RLOs identified through social media, referral and word-of-mouth;
- Establishing and facilitating dialogue via a WhatsApp group over a 6-week period. This included planning a workshop and allowing participation via WhatsApp in the (Zoom) consultation process for those without access to reliable internet. Messages were exchanged via both text and audio clips. A draft of this consultation report was shared with WhatsApp group members for comment and refinement before publication;
- Inviting RLOs to submit their own written SWOT Analysis;
- Facilitating a Zoom consultation with Rohingya RLOs in Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh;
- Facilitating a follow-up Zoom consultation with Rohingya leaders from Bangladesh and the wider diaspora (New Zealand, Malaysia, United Kingdom and Australia); and
- APNOR's Executive Director and Coordinator maintaining personal communication with Rohingya leaders engaged in this process via email, social media and WhatsApp, which remains ongoing.

PARTICIPATION

Representatives from 21 refugee-led organisations (RLOs) and their associates participated in this consultation process. The majority of RLOs represented were based in refugee camps near Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh. However, discussions extended to refugee leaders and representatives from RLOs in New Zealand, Australia, Malaysia, United Kingdom, and beyond. (See appendix for list of participating RLOs.)

Snapshot

RLO contacts database	40 RLOs and/or individual leaders identified
WhatsApp Group	38 active members
SWOT analysis	10 responses from RLOs submitted
Zoom consultation I (Bangladesh)	24 participants
Zoom consultation II (regional)	34 participants
Personal communication	100s of messages (SMS, email, WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook)
RLOs engaged	21

SWOT ANALYSIS

Consultations were organised around a SWOT-style analysis with participants asked to contribute their perspectives on: community successes and strengths, challenges and opportunities, and actions for Rohingya refugees and for other stakeholders. Responses raised across the process were compiled into a single document, with ideas grouped by theme.

Due to the high volume of consolidated responses, the following summarises key ideas or themes in order of frequency, with selected quotes from participants included to illustrate key points.

Successes and strengths

Our community-led initiatives calling for justice

We are advocating to the international level about our suffering. And we commemorated two times Rohingya Genocide Remembrance Day all together by gathering campaign. In 2020, we are not able due to the Covid-19 pandemic but we didn't stop; we accomplished this year's Genocide Remembrance Day by silent protest.

Our young people's educational achievements

We keep education on high, that's why some students study out of camps and we are increasing the number of students every year. We think that's our success story and that's a success story for Rohingya community.



Our community has held firm on repatriation plans and demands

We can see that the majority of our community will not return to our homeland until we get a sustainable solution. This is the most successful story in our community.

The successes of our refugee-led organisations and advocacy

Our CBOs are working hard and our activities are many, although we haven't reached our goals yet.

Challenges

Many important challenges were discussed through the different consultation stages. The following are the top 10 most frequently mentioned challenges, grouped by broad theme. Within each of these key themes there are a number of different challenges broken down further into sub-themes. It should be noted that the most frequently mentioned challenges may be indicative of, but do not necessarily reflect, wider community priorities.

1. Access to education and training opportunities

Frequency raised during consultations: 37 times

Key challenges:

- Poor quality of primary education in camps;
- Lack of access to education beyond year 9 (middle and high school):
- Lack of access to higher education:
- Lack of access to education and training programs for women;
- Restrictions on using Myanmar curriculum in schools.

Children are not provided high quality education. The campbased teachers are not qualified. ...The parents are afraid because their children are not getting the proper education. Their children don't get any improvement from the learning centres, so they don't want to send their children there.

If you see that people are going to Malaysia and other places, this is because there is nothing here for them, particularly for the women. There is no education or training opportunities.

Many organisations are getting money from UNICEF. They are building learning centres everywhere. They hire teachers that are not taking their jobs seriously.

There is no education for middle school and high school students in camp. NGOs or other humanitarian aid didn't think about them till now. ...And there is nearly 11,000 students of middle and high school, but all of them are doing nothing ...The communities are feeling depressed about them.

We set up a school but the government of Bangladesh didn't allow us to run it, and wouldn't let us use the Myanmar curriculum.

We want the curriculum that we learned before in Myanmar because we want to return home.

2. Community consultation processes and engagement in decision-making

Frequency raised: 22 times Key challenges:

- Lack of meaningful consultation with Rohingya communities to inform decisions about response (policy, programs, priorities);
- Lack of responsiveness by authorities, UN agencies and NGOs to community feedback;
- Restrictions on who is invited to consultations.

NGOs and INGOs are working in camps. Before and after making any project they didn't consult with community. Why?

Our voices are hardly heard in the decision making.

Rohingya refugees feel power is not shared equally by humanitarian actors or other stakeholders. They want to be included and consulted.

Many organisations want to work with Rohingya, but they don't consult with us. Only Rohingya know what the situation is and what we need. I don't know how they decide what to do. Is it lucky draw?

UNICEF did a one-off consultation, but they weren't listening. They were just talking about themselves. They are taking their own way. They are talking and we are listening, and that's all. It's not really a consultation, it's just a meeting.

When there are consultations with UN agencies and government, they only call people to attend who love these agencies. Those who raise the real voice, they are kept behind.

There are many challenges in Rohingya refugee camp, about repatriation, about rations, about many things. But the issue is, nobody consults with Rohingya to solve our crisis; our problems. They just guess the need of us... So that's why, my view is, if any supporter, any INGO wants to support anything, they want to help Rohingya, they should consult with Rohingya about what they really need and how they can support them.

3. Access to adequate healthcare

Frequency raised: 18 times Key challenges:

- Lack of access to healthcare services outside of camps, particularly for people with chronic conditions like Hepatitis C that camp-based primary healthcare facilities will not treat;
- Inaccessibility and lack of affordability of medicines;
- Poor quality of care.

If there is a household with five persons, the hospital will only provide medicine to one person even if there [are] three people sick with fever in a family.

You can see the health facilities in the camp, but this is only for show. You can't get proper treatment when you go inside. The staff only go there to get the salary. Our people do not get the proper treatment; the proper medicine.

Healthcare facilities in camp are primary only. There is no advanced treatment for chronic disease like Hepatitis C and diabetes.

Even in a serious health emergency people aren't provided permission to go to Cox's Bazaar for treatment and it has resulted in many deaths.

4. Sexual and gender based violence

Frequency raised: 17 times Key challenges:

- Prevalence of early and forced marriages in camps;
- Trafficking of women and girls, including into prostitution;
- Dowry issues (either preventing couples marrying or as a survival mechanism for families leading to forced marriages);
- Increasing domestic violence;
- Lack of responsiveness by authorities to reports of forced marriage.

There is no security for the Rohingya refugee wherever we go, both inside and outside the camps. We have had enough. We have kidnapping and human trafficking, we have sexual violence, and domestic violence. That is taking place highly in the camps. The security is not enough for us.

Forced marriage is increasing in camps.

We receive humanitarian aid in the camp, food and things, but they don't consider the dowry issue. Some girls who are over 18 cannot marry because the family doesn't have money for a dowry and this is causing stress and worry because the girl can't marry in time, and we see increases in domestic violence.

We have a problem with brokers. We have more females in the camp, so the brokers say they want to marry and then they sell them for prostitution.

5. Response to COVID-19

Frequency raised: 15 times Key challenges:

- Information gaps and spread of misinformation;
- Inability to maintain social distancing in crowded conditions;
- Lack of access to preventative measures (masks, soap, hand sanitiser etc.);
- Inadequate healthcare facilities if there is an outbreak.

International NGOs didn't provide enough resources like masks... They only provide information with no hygiene materials. How are we supposed to maintain social distancing in crowded places?

With the COVID isolation centres, communication is poor and [doctors are] not treating [people] as human, hence the community is scared to go to the isolation centres.

We are experiencing tiredness and fatigue. COVID-19 is an additional illness to all the other diseases we are facing. We don't know how to deal with COVID. We don't have soap or nothing.

We need to build trust in our community. Since the arrival of COVID-19, we hear so [many] rumours and each person interpret their own thing with dealing with COVID.

6. Human rights in Myanmar and return

Frequency raised: 11 times Key challenges:

- Ongoing human rights and security concerns in Myanmar;
- Negotiating dignified and sustainable return;
- Documenting and pursuing justice for genocide.

The Myanmar Government is continuously denying our fundamental human rights and safety security.

We are not allowed to go the university or to study higher education by Myanmar Government.

Everyone is wanting to go back.

The community wants to go back home and we need more negotiation between Bangladesh and Myanmar.

7. Livelihoods and food insecurity

Frequency raised: 11 times Key challenges:

- Food insecurity and hunger;
- Inadequacy of food rations;
- Lack of jobs and precarious employment;
- Young people working for NGOs not getting paid.

We are going through financial hardship as we don't have proper jobs. It's very difficult to support our families. Some of us, if we have relatives overseas, we might be able to receive some support to meet our daily needs. Otherwise we will remain in hunger most of the time.

Youth and community members working as part of NGOs and not receiving a salary but as volunteers. That system doesn't exist and we face discrimination.

Because of the lockdown, people have not been able to work. For those people who were poor, they are not able to feed and carry on their family, because the WFP food is not enough. And also, the food provided by WFP is not suitable for Rohingya people. They don't like those food, so most of the people they sell those items and they take some ration from the local shops. But they have not enough, these rations. They need to work.

8. Capacity of refugee leadership and refugee-led organisations (RLOs)

Frequency raised: 8 times Key challenges:

- Access to training and capacity building to enhance RLOs effectiveness, accountability and leadership;
- Lack of resources for RLOs;
- Communication issues (internet access in camps);
- Registration of RLOs;
- Access to bank accounts.

Our RLOs get no donor funds. We need support from international donors.

How can we participate when we don't have internet? WhatsApp has been the only possible way to communicate little.

Refugees have no bank account and legally facing many restrictions as well

Here in the camp, our leaders have trouble understanding their responsibilities and accountability. We need more leadership skills.

We can't legally register our organisations in the camp level. This is the main challenge for us. If we are able to register our organisation, everything will be easier for us.

9. Restrictions on movement for refugees in camps

Frequency raised: 7 times Key challenges:

- Plans to restrict movement will impact on young people studying outside of camps;
- Limiting movement from camps negatively impacts on access to healthcare, family relationships and survival economies;
- Restrictions will exacerbate trauma.

People are traumatised by what happened in Myanmar, so they feel like the fences will be like [being] trapped and caught.

The government is putting a fence around us and restricting movement. People are afraid to go to Cox's Bazaar to get treatment because of restrictions on movement. This is a big problem for us.

Restriction of movement is big and not able to see or check on families in Cox's Bazaar

There are students studying outside of the camp, including some who are studying at colleges. The government talking about fencing us in and restricting movement will mean these students cannot continue their studies. We are staying the camp like captives.

10. Legal status and protection in Bangladesh

Frequency raised: 6 times Key challenges:

- Confusion and uncertainty about plans to relocate refugees to Bhasan Char;
- Lack of rights and uncertain legal status in Bangladesh;

The Bangladesh Government is not giving us legal refugee status. What is the reason behind it?

Racism and discrimination is increasing between the local and refugee community due to the corruption and problems between two communities. For this situation, if we get any support to make social cohesion it might be better to make a good relationship between these two communities.

- Tension between refugee and local communities leading to lack of safety;
- Corruption.

Bangladesh signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and doesn't follow up their legal commitment

People can voluntarily move to Bhasan Char. Some people have visited, but I'd like to know how people were selected to visit? And what are they going to see – the beauty? From what I can tell, they can't tell about the geography from these visits and whether it is a safe place to live. Is it okay to live there, or not? That's why our community may be confused about whether to move there.

Other challenges

Other challenges:

- Mental health issues (#5);
- Lack of social cohesion and unity in camps (#4);
- Inadequacy of shelter (#3);
- Lack of cemetery space in camps and cost of burial outside is too expensive (#2)

Most people are dying for not having hope.

No one can maintain their mentality being a refugee, in a refugee shelter. There's no electricity inside the shelter, the hygienic food we can't afford to have... In the camp, everyone from children to elderly people faces the mentality. They want to go back to Myanmar and stay, fully and happily on their own land.

So many parties in the refugee camps with different thinking. Small family shelters are inadequate for families with five to nine members; it is an overcrowded place.

There are a lot of people dying in the camp every day, but there are not enough cemetery spaces available in the camp to bury them. We have to pay [20,000?] taka to go to a cemetery outside the camp, but we don't have enough income to pay for this. We need a cemetery.

Opportunities

The Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR) is offering to support the development and strengthening of Rohingya advocacy and can facilitate connections

If you are with us, we can get so much ideas and this helps to develop our community in the future.

Rohingya diaspora community leaders in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere are willing to help our sisters and brothers in Bangladesh. Just tell us what you need us to do.

We have no opportunity until now, but we can be unity with the skill of unity.

There are established RLOs that are willing and able to step up

We can conduct training for both men and women's empowerment. We conduct weekly meetings with the camp representatives. We can negotiate with government official and UN agencies. We can share the objectives of Rohingya which happen in the camp to the responsible department. We can meet with high level delegations.

We can care for our community more than anyone, so why are the Bangladesh Government not giving us the chance to move?

The youth are willing to support and do more for our communities.

The international community is willing to support the Rohingya

Bangladesh is supporting us.

The international community, NGOs, INGOs and UN Agencies are helping us.

There are possibilities for students to pursue education outside camps

We have some individual learning centres which we can run whenever we want And first we make a student from learning centres and then he had opportunities to study out of camp.

Actions

Actions to address the challenges identified, as well as the opportunities, were discussed in terms of (1) Actions for the Rohingya community; and (2) Actions for others. Again, these have been grouped by theme in order of frequency.

What do we need to do?

Action:

Establish a Rohingya Refugee Think Tank group to provide a stronger voice for the Rohingya community We need to discuss all together and do something to create a shift.

Consultations with UN agencies and government, they only call people to attend who love these agencies. Those who raise the real voice, they are kept behind. APNOR can help organise people who are shouting from outside.

We need to consult everybody – minority or majority – everyone who are refugees, vulnerable, sufferers, their voice should be heard in a proper way.

We need teamwork; to cooperate among ourselves. Some NGOs they play games, they create divisions between CBOs and play favourites. Government agencies are not happy when refugees work together because a united voice will bring some sort of regulation. In this way, APNOR can play a more constructive role in bringing all refugee communities together to work on the same platform to pursue a united agenda.

We need a strong network to advocate for a faster durable solution with safe and dignified life.

Ensure there is female representation from the camp. We need women to be speaking for themselves and represented in these consultations.

APNOR need to try to be unity of civil societies in camp then we can be like network of APNOR. We can reach to our goal, systematically.

Action:

With support, work to address issues in our own community Here in the camps, most of the Rohingya-led organizations are working for the community to promote peace, justice, education, politician and else, which will make it easy to have future life in Bangladesh refugee camps and Myanmar. However, it is going weak due to lack support and inspiration.

Health ministry and NGOs working on health need to coordinate and create a better system. We can train up community health workers among the refugees. We have traditional birth attendants. Once we have first aid workers amongst our community, we can help ourselves. Once we return to our own state, to Arakan, we can implement our own ideas.

Action:

Work with allies to advocate for justice and access to durable solutions Coordinate with powerful countries and put pressure on Myanmar. Discrimination and racism are a big problem in Myanmar and we need to address them to end by working together.

As we mention earlier, you have to make a strong team among Rohingya youth that can coordinate with you. The team will act as a supporting role and APNOR should directly approach to Bangladesh government. Finally, you have to put pressure on Myanmar Government indirectly though Bangladesh Government.

All Rohingya diaspora leaders, international community must emphasise to the existing people (Rohingya) in Northern Rakhine State for their freedom. Need to work together to put pressure on Myanmar

We need to be consulted on how we repatriate as soon as possible.

What can other stakeholders do for Rohingya?

Action:

Consult and work in partnership with the Rohingya community

Who:

All humanitarian actors, including APNOR, NGOs, UN agencies, donors

Please help us to fight peacefully for our rights by ourselves.

Here in camp so many agencies and humanitarian NGOs and INGOs are working but they didn't consult and take suggestions to work with us. We need an intermediate person to reach them. We are requesting APNOR to stay between community and humanitarian responders and make them talk with us.

Refugees are not given a chance to make the decisions. Refugees have their own rights to make decisions, so international NGOs, government agencies, all UN agencies, should consult with the refugee community.

If we are able to investigate, we find that so many of the humanitarian activities in the camp are disadvantaged (problematic). We are researching, but we are not able to see changes because we have no power.

Action:

Further develop education and training opportunities

Who:

All humanitarian actors, including NGOs, UN agencies, donors, governments

Please provide educational support to the students who are interested in studying.

We need formal education; our education has been lost for the past three years since we came to this camp.

More consultation to happen by key INGOs on education with communities. Education or training opportunities for youth, so they can become teachers or doctors or politicians; so they can get jobs more easily. We need someone to teach the computer class and other classes for the youth. If the government can open up opportunities, young people would like to study many things.

There are young people creating movies, cars, art – but no one comes to appreciate them. There is so much talent dying in the camps. We need international community to find them and nurture their talent; teach them. We need to empower our women, by providing training such as livelihood training.

Action:

Further build the capacity of refugee leaders and refugeeled organisations

Who:

APNOR, NGOs, donors, other humanitarian actors

It would be very helpful for us if any organisation, network or group like APNOR can help us with some trainings such as capacity building, leadership, advocacy, international law, etc.

We need more actors from our community and the place where can we get chance to change our conditions. But we don't know where and how. We are requesting you to help us to reach our goals.

In Myanmar we couldn't access higher education, so it is hard for us to select our leaders. Here in the camp, our leaders have trouble understanding their responsibility and accountability. We need more leadership skills and training.

We need external support otherwise it is too difficult for us to run our own activities. Both technical and financial support is needed.

Action:

Put pressure on the Myanmar Government to enable refugees to return

Who:

International community, particularly governments and UN

Conducting meeting and conference will not help to change the country constitutions and regional administrative laws. Powerful countries and the UN Security Council should give Myanmar pressure.

You all need to pressure Myanmar to accept us again.

We do not want to stay here a long time. Please talk to the Myanmar government so we can return.

ICJ, ICC is a hope for us as part of solution. International community must help creating opportunities to fight for our right with advocacy.

We need international pressure on Myanmar.

APNOR can approach Bangladesh Government so that they can put strong pressure on Myanmar Government for our quick repatriation with our desired demands.

Action:

Improve conditions in refugee camps

Who:

Humanitarian agencies working in refugee camps in Bangladesh Humanitarian actors need to increase health activities, need more educational activities on hygiene like hand wash. This is critical right now during COVID-19.

Lack of support for elderly Rohingya. They need fans and lights.

If you are a humanitarian worker, you need to know how to work on the big things — education, healthcare system is not working — The staff who are working in the camps don't have the capacity to deal with the vulnerable people. The people are facing so many challenges in the camp. They need to be able to give the people the satisfaction. Like, if you don't have the medicine, find them. If you don't have the proper chairs for the patients, you need to find a place for people to sit. In so many INGO hospitals and clinics, there are lines of people but nowhere for them to sit, so they are standing. People are standing for 2 or 3 hours with fever, coughing and sneezing and everything.

WFP need to change the food they are distributing. They are giving peas, but people don't eat this. The WFP know this situation, but they're not changing their actions.

Health ministry and NGOs working on health need to coordinate and create a better system. We can train up community health workers among the refugees.

Right now we have been in the camp about three years. Many of our eldest people are dying due to the serious diseases...but we can't bury them in a near cemetery. If we want to go to the cemetery outside the camp, we must give to the local community taka. How can we get this taka? We have raised this issue and have been told they will arrange something, but still they haven't done anything. We don't have enough space to bury people. This is the responsibility of the INGO and NGO.

Action:

Allow Rohingya to speak for themselves

Who:

All humanitarian actors

We need victims of genocide to be speak for ourselves internationally.

I request to every donor to come and visit us, and hear from us. They usually hear from NGOs only. They need to hear from Rohingya directly about how we are surviving here. We need the donors in the consultations.

We are looking forward some person who are trying to make dialogue between us and the Myanmar government and Bangladesh government to fill up our gaps and needs. You can stay by us by keeping in touch in these issues.

Amplify our voices to the right place and help us as necessary

Action:

Provide financial support to Rohingya refugee-led organisations

Who:

Donors, UN agencies

We need to empower the men and women and develop an advocacy program for the community. We need to empower the community. We have to train our people. Other people will not do it for us. We need funds from donors to do this.

Civil society workers are only working voluntarily, so it limits our capacity to help our community because of financial difficulties – such as covering transport. We need a permanent solution to this. If we can get financial support, we can achieve our goals in helping our people.

Invite donors to speak to us. We want to know whether they are willing to support us in the camp. What are their funding priorities?

More information

Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR) apnor.refugees@gmail.com

APPENDIX

Refugee-led organisations (RLO)

- 1. Arakan Rohingya National Union (ARNU), Bangladesh
- 2. Arakan Rohingya Society for Peace and Human Rights (ARSPH), Bangladesh
- 3. Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR), Regional network
- 4. Bangladesh Rohingya Students Union (BRSU)
- 5. Coalition of Rohingya Organisations in Malaysia
- 6. Education for Rohingya Children (ERC), Bangladesh
- 7. Education for Rohingya Generation (ERG), Bangladesh
- 8. Restricted Stock Unit (RSU), Bangladesh
- 9. Rohingya Community Development Campaign (RCDC), Bangladesh
- 10. Rohingya Peace Initiative (RPI), Bangladesh
- 11. Rohingya Refugee Committee (RRC), Bangladesh
- 12. Rohingya Students Network (RSN), Bangladesh
- 13. Rohingya Student Union (RSU), Bangladesh
- 14. Rohingya Women Education Initiative (RWEI), Bangladesh
- 15. Rohingya Women for Justice and Peace (RWJP), Bangladesh
- 16. Rohingya Women's Empowerment and Advocacy Network (RWEAN), Bangladesh
- 17. Rohingya Youth Association (RYA), Bangladesh
- 18. Rohingya Youth Education (RYE), Bangladesh
- 19. Rohingya Youth Federation (RYF), Bangladesh
- 20. Rohingya Youth For Legal Action (RYLA), Bangladesh
- 21. Rollywood CBO, Bangladesh