

Development for the Stateless: Rohingya Case Study

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There are currently upwards of one million Rohingya refugees living in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. For all the talk of moving the Rohingya elsewhere, such as Bashan Char Island off the coast of Bangladesh, or repatriating them to Myanmar, it is almost certain that they will remain where they are for an indefinite period of time. History has shown that the average age of a refugee camp is 12 years. Like most other refugee camp situations, this one will likely last for at least another decade. Many NGOs and aid agencies that are working on Rohingya issues realize that this is not temporary, and are starting to take a longer-term view of the camps. The shift from emergency relief to development has begun, underscoring the fact that the refugee crisis has huge long-term implications for how development operates beyond state citizenship.

The Rohingya crisis is a useful case study to understand how refugees are slowly being brought into the traditional development framework. The scope of facilities and programs set up by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and the hundreds of NGOs working in the camps over the past year is remarkable. They have built camps from the ground up and organized them into zones with basic roads and latrines, tubewells, health facilities, and community centers. However, the separate institutions that are in place to deal with longer-term development and emergency relief are not aligned in their goals. This affects the extent of aid given, the type of facilities that are built, and of course the economic and political rights and social support that the Rohingya have.

A strong indication of the shift toward development in the Rohingya camps is the recent investment from the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB), of \$480 million and \$100 million respectively. Traditionally, these two institutions have invested in long-term development projects and supported governments in capacity building. In the past few years, they have created a relief fund for emergency situations exactly like the Rohingya crisis.

One of the investments from the World Bank and ADB is in renewable energy in the Rohingya camps. The investment in energy access shows a gradual shift toward longer-term, or at least medium-term, planning in the camps. Compared to international aid funding in every other sector—water and sanitation, health, shelters, etc.—energy had no allocated funding at the beginning of the Rohingya influx. This is largely because energy is not seen as essential to emergency relief, which is arguably an outdated view from the aid industry, as energy access is linked to more positive health affects and gender safety and equality. Now with the World Bank and ADB's investment plan, there is a portion allocated to set up some solar mini-grids in 2019, as well as constructing more solar lamps and distributing solar lanterns.

Historically, there has not been a systematic approach to energy supply in conflict settings because they are thought to be shorter term. Most of the energy is supplied ad hoc by individual NGOs or international aid agencies, usually through diesel generators. The move toward renewable energy shows increasing interest in long-term development because it is inherently sustainable and simple to use. A solar mini-grid offers a cleaner

and more consistent alternative to diesel generators, and can potentially be used to anchor local mini-grids if the refugee camps are present in the longer term.

Out of all the Rohingya camps, it is striking that the only one that is connected to the national electricity grid, and thus situated for longer term, is a camp in Teknaf, where some Rohingya have been around for many years and have essentially assimilated into the surrounding community. Perhaps the thought here is that there is “value added” if the Rohingya contribute economically, so it makes sense to invest in electricity lines. However, this situation is exceedingly rare, as the vast majority of Rohingya cannot move freely outside the camps and thus are unable to be economically independent.

There are currently about six million people in protracted displacement situations globally, and even more migrants, who are not officially given economic and political rights by the state. Crises like this will only continue to happen at varying scales, whether through ethnic cleansing, environmental disaster, economic crisis, or something else. The UN, development agencies, NGOs, and some governments are only just beginning to rethink how we prioritize refugees and migrants and integrate them into existing development frameworks. There will be many lessons to learn from the Rohingya crisis for years to come. A likely one will be how to conceptualize development for those that have been systematically “othered” and persecuted.