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Education Disruption among Rohingya Children in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar Refugee Camps (2017–2024): A Fragile-State Perspective

Jia-Ying Lyu
Fuzhou University of International Studies and Trade
Fuzhou, China

ABSTRACT

Since 2017, Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar district has hosted over one million Rohingya refugees, nearly half of whom are children. Living in highly congested camps and dependent on humanitarian aid, Rohingya children face severe disruptions in learning and long-term human development. This study applies Fragile State Theory as its core analytical lens and conducts a qualitative content analysis of UN reports, NGO assessments, and academic literature published between 2017 and 2024. Findings indicate that while humanitarian agencies have expanded informal learning opportunities, access remains unstable due to host-government restrictions on formal education, chronic funding shortages, and deteriorating security conditions. The analysis shows that state capacity constraints in both Myanmar and Bangladesh reinforce a cycle of educational exclusion, producing a high risk of a "lost generation." The study concludes with policy recommendations for accreditation pathways, sustainable financing, and stronger refugee participation in education governance.

Keywords: Education in emergencies; Fragile State theory; humanitarian governance; learning access; Rohingya refugees.

INTRODUCTION

The Rohingya are a Muslim minority native to Myanmar's western Rakhine state. Decades of discriminatory policies culminated in 2017 when Myanmar's military launched a scorched earth campaign. More than 742 000 Rohingya–half of them children–fled across the border into Bangladesh between August and December 2017. By 2024 nearly one million Rohingya refugees resided in makeshift shelters in Cox's Bazar and on Bhasan Char island. The area hosts thirty-three densely populated camps where refugees lack basic services including education, health care, nutrition and sanitation. Approximately 95 % of Rohingya households depend on humanitarian aid for survival. Amid these conditions the right to education–guaranteed by international human rights law–remains elusive.

Children constitute about half of the camp population. Yet schooling in Cox's Bazar predates 2017 and was already substandard; the district has Bangladesh's lowest retention and achievement rates. Most Rohingya children have never attended formal school. The host government regards the crisis as temporary and has long restricted refugees' access to national schools or permanent structures. Authorities fear that providing formal education will encourage permanent settlement. Consequently, thousands of learning centres have been established by UN agencies and NGOs in the camps. These centres operate under the Learning Competency Framework and Approach (LCFA), an informal curriculum that teaches English, mathematics, Burmese and life skills. Because LCFA credentials are not recognised outside the camps, adolescents have limited pathways to higher education or employment. Female students face additional barriers: families often withdraw girls when they reach puberty for fear of safety and honour.

Scholarly analysis also shows that the informal education system in the camps is designed as a short term, emergency response rather than a durable solution. Habib et al. (2023) describe non formal education programmes for Rohingya children as top down and emergency oriented, restricting integration into mainstream education. Shohel (2023) documents that children live in overcrowded shelters, suffer from malnutrition and disease, and are deprived of nationality and rights. Hossain (2023) further emphasises that the absence of formal and non-formal education undermines children's ability to become active members of society and that structural barriers hinder progress.

Education is not only a human right but also a protective factor that reduces early marriage, child labour and trafficking. In contexts of forced displacement, schooling provides routine, psychosocial support and

opportunities for social cohesion. Without education, children risk exploitation by armed groups and criminal gangs; indeed, security threats have led parents to keep children at home. This paper explores the complex interplay between Fragile State dynamics, humanitarian action and the right to education in the Rohingya camps between 2017 and 2024.

Existing studies document structural barriers in Rohingya education but rarely analyse these challenges through a Fragile State analytical lens. This study fills this gap by connecting educational outcomes with state capacity, sovereignty concerns, and governance fragility in both Myanmar and Bangladesh.

This study is guided by three research questions:

1. How do Fragile State dynamics in Myanmar and Bangladesh shape Rohingya children's access to education between 2017 and 2024?
2. What factors legal, political, financial, and sociocultural most significantly disrupt learning in the Cox's Bazar camps?
3. How do humanitarian actors mitigate these disruptions, and what limitations emerge from operating within a fragile governance environment?

Together, these questions clarify how state fragility constrains long-term educational pathways and inform the study's interpretation of humanitarian interventions.

Theoretical Framework: Fragile State Theory

Fragile State theory emerged in the early 2000s to conceptualise countries where state institutions cannot or will not provide basic services and security to their populations. The OECD's Development Assistance Committee defines fragility as a situation where "a state no longer provides to its society what is expected or demanded of it". Fragile States often exhibit poor governance, weak rule of law, corruption, internal conflict and dependence on external aid. They are vulnerable to shocks and unable to manage social expectations, leading to protests, violence and potential collapse. However, fragility exists on a spectrum. Many countries display pockets of stability alongside pockets of fragility. Instead of labelling states as failed or collapsed, the concept of fragility recognises heterogeneity and emphasises building resilience.

In this paper, Fragile State theory helps analyse both Myanmar and Bangladesh. Myanmar's persecution of the Rohingya reflects state failure in protecting minority rights. The mass exodus has externalised the crisis onto Bangladesh, where the government simultaneously hosts refugees and enforces restrictive policies. Bangladesh is not a failed state, but the presence

of more than one million stateless people strains its resources and creates pockets of fragility. By denying refugees formal education and employment, the state attempts to preserve sovereignty and discourage permanent settlement. Yet such policies undermine human capital, increase dependence on aid and perpetuate a cycle of insecurity. Fragile State theory underscores how weak governance and limited state capacity generate space for non state actors–international organisations, NGOs and community groups–to provide essential services. Understanding this dynamic is critical for assessing education interventions in the camps.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative content analysis of secondary sources published between 2017 and 2024. The dataset includes UNHCR's Annual Results Report 2024 (released May 2025), UNICEF situation updates, Education Cannot Wait (ECW) programme documents, Joint Response Plans (JRP), Human Rights Watch reports, and peer-reviewed academic literature on Rohingya education and Fragile State governance.

Inclusion criteria:

1. Publications produced by UN agencies, INGOs, government bodies, or peer-reviewed journals;
2. Reports providing quantitative indicators or descriptive analysis of Rohingya education;
3. Sources covering the period 2017–2024 with extensions to mid-2025 where relevant to education trends.

Exclusion criteria:

1. Opinion pieces or media commentary lacking methodological grounding;
2. Reports without identifiable data sources;
3. Publications unrelated to education or state fragility.

A three-step analytical procedure was used:

- Extraction of key data on enrolment, curriculum, infrastructure, and protection risks;
- Coding of themes such as legal barriers, funding volatility, and security conditions;
- Interpretation of patterns through Fragile State Theory, especially concepts of state capacity, sovereignty preservation, and reliance on non-state actors.

This approach enhances transparency and replicability while acknowledging that restricted access to camps limits primary data collection.

Historical Overview: Emergence of Education Challenges (2017–2024)

The 2017 Exodus and Early Responses

The Rohingya crisis escalated on 25 August 2017 when Myanmar's security forces launched "clearance operations" following attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. Villages were burned, mass killings occurred and women were raped; over 700 000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh within months. The vast majority–roughly half children–arrived traumatised, malnourished and lacking documentation. Bangladesh established thirty three camps in the Cox's Bazar district (particularly Kutupalong and Nayapara) and two registered camps in Teknaf. Land belonging to local communities was requisitioned, exacerbating tensions. Initially, humanitarian agencies focused on life saving services: shelter, food, water and healthcare. Education was a secondary priority. Nonetheless, UNHCR, UNICEF and NGOs quickly erected temporary learning centres–structures made of bamboo and tarp with dirt floors and no electricity. These centres provided two hour sessions aimed at restoring routine, offering psychosocial support and teaching basic literacy.

The Learning Competency Framework and Approach

In 2018 UNICEF and the Bangladeshi education authorities introduced the Learning Competency Framework and Approach (LCFA), an informal curriculum delivered in English and Burmese. LCFA covers four subjects: English, mathematics, Burmese language and life skills. It was designed to align with the Myanmar national curriculum while respecting host government restrictions. By 2019 there were about 3 200 learning centres in the camps, with 70 % supported by UNICEF. Each centre served about 40 children and employed Rohingya volunteers alongside Bangladeshi facilitators. The curriculum emphasised interactive lessons and psychosocial support rather than formal assessments.

International agencies pushed for greater continuity with the Myanmar curriculum to facilitate future repatriation. After negotiations, in January 2020 Bangladesh approved a pilot project allowing the Myanmar curriculum in grades 6–9. Implementation began with 10 000 children. However, the COVID 19 pandemic forced closures; learning centres were shut for months, and many students never returned. Meanwhile, the government banned use of the Bangla curriculum in camps and prohibited refugees from attending Bangladeshi schools. NGOs provided limited alternative spaces, but capacity remained far below needs.

Growth of Education Infrastructure

Despite constraints, the number of learning facilities expanded. By 2023 there were over 6 000 learning facilities–learning centres, community based learning facilities (CBLFs) and cross sectoral shared spaces. Many were run by NGOs with funding from the Joint Response Plan. Yet only 30 % of JRP education targets were achieved. The informal nature of these programmes meant that children received only limited instruction and no recognised qualifications. Around 400 000 Rohingya children lacked access to any form of education because of legal and administrative barriers. Restrictions on building permanent schools or employing refugee teachers hindered expansion.

Bhasan Char relocation

In 2020 Bangladesh began relocating refugees to Bhasan Char, a sedimentary island in the Bay of Bengal. Critics feared isolation and exposure to cyclones. By early 2024 about 40 000 refugees had been relocated. Education services on the island lagged behind those in Cox's Bazar; there were fewer learning centres and limited curricula. The 2024 JRP noted that 75 000 refugees on Bhasan Char would require separate education funding. Without accreditation or proper infrastructure, children risked being further marginalised.

Challenges to Education: Resource Scarcity and Political Sensitivity

Legal and policy barriers

Bangladesh is not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and does not formally recognise the Rohingya as refugees. The government issues identity cards but denies them citizenship, formal education and employment. Policy restricts schools to temporary structures and prohibits formal curricula, reflecting the expectation that refugees will eventually repatriate. Hossain's study notes that government policy "denies them formal education due to their legal status and documentation," preventing around 400 000 children from receiving primary and secondary education. The government allows only informal education in English or Burmese within the camps and refuses financial support for these programmes. Religious schools (Quami Madrasa) operate but are not recognised by the national system. These policies reflect sovereignty concerns and fear of permanent integration. As a result, refugees remain in legal limbo with few opportunities for advancement.

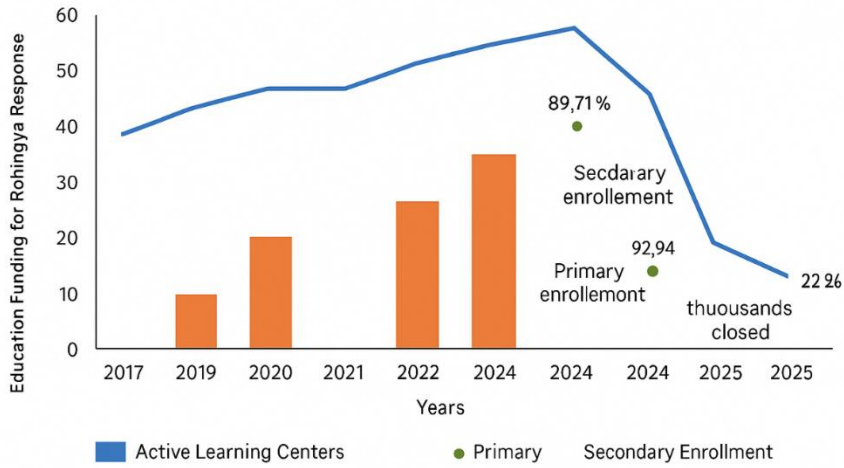
Funding and Resource Constraints

Humanitarian education in Cox's Bazar relies on donor funding. In 2024 the JRP appealed for US$852.4 million to address the needs of 1.35 million people, including US$68.4 million earmarked for education. However, global crises have diverted aid. Human Rights Watch reported that foreign donors, including the United States, slashed support in 2025, reducing humanitarian education funding from US$72 million to about US$22 million. UNICEF suspended thousands of learning centres due to lack of funds. These cutbacks exacerbated an existing education crisis for 437 000 school age children. While some community led schools remained open, they lacked recognition and had to charge fees of US$0.50–5 per month, which many families could not afford. Teachers in these schools were often unpaid volunteers with limited training. Without sustained funding, learning centres cannot be scaled up or improved.

To better illustrate how financial constraints shape education delivery in the camps, Figure 1 visualizes the fluctuations in funding alongside the corresponding changes in learning-center availability and enrollment outcomes from 2017 to 2025.

Figure 1.

Funding Volatility and Its Impact on Rohingya Education (2017–2025)



NOTE: This figure illustrates how shifts in humanitarian funding particularly the steep decline from approximately US$70 million in 2024 to US$22 million in 2025 directly affect the availability of active learning centers, teacher incentives, and enrollment stability for Rohingya children. Periods of reduced funding correspond with widespread learning-center closures,

decreased instructional hours, and heightened risks of long-term educational exclusion, especially for adolescents and girls.

As the figure shows, the contraction of education funding in 2025 aligns with the closure of thousands of learning centers and a projected decline in access and learning continuity for more than 437,000 school-age Rohingya children.

Infrastructure and Quality Issues

Most learning centres are makeshift structures built from bamboo and plastic sheeting. They lack desks, chairs, textbooks and electricity. Overcrowding means classes are short and irregular. The LCFA covers only four subjects and lacks structured lesson plans, curricula or assessments. Teacher quality is another challenge. There is a shortage of trained teachers; humanitarian agencies struggle to recruit instructors with secondary education. Volunteers receive minimal training in pedagogy or psychosocial support. The scarcity of female teachers limits girls' participation. Programmes like Caritas Switzerland's "Essence of Learning" aim to provide mental and educational support and weekly monitoring, but coverage is small. Lack of accreditation means that even when children complete LCFA levels, they cannot progress to secondary or tertiary education.

Socio Cultural and Gender Barriers

Rohingya families value education but face cultural and economic barriers. Poverty forces children to work or care for siblings. Early marriage is common, particularly among girls; many parents withdraw daughters from school at puberty due to concerns about safety and propriety. Social norms limit girls' mobility and restrict their interactions with male teachers. Parents may prioritise religious instruction at madrassas over secular learning. The lack of female teachers and separate sanitation facilities further discourages girls' attendance. For boys, frustration over limited education and employment opportunities can lead to involvement in illicit activities.

Security and Health Risks

Security within the camps has deteriorated. Organised crime, armed groups and criminal gangs operate with impunity. Human Rights Watch noted that violence–including abductions–surged in 2024, causing parents to keep children at home. The COVID 19 pandemic, frequent fires and monsoon floods have also disrupted education. In 2024 heavy rains triggered landslides and flooding, damaging shelters and learning centres. Fire hazards are heightened due to the temporary nature of shelters and restrictions on building

materials. At the height of the pandemic, all learning centres were closed, and remote learning was not feasible because of digital exclusion.

Aid Cuts and Political Transitions

Bangladesh held general elections in January 2024 and formed an interim government after student protests in August 2024. Political uncertainty hampered policy continuity. Donor fatigue and shifting geopolitical priorities–particularly after the outbreak of war in Ukraine and other global crises–reduced humanitarian funding. By mid 2025, donor contributions to education had shrunk significantly, prompting UNICEF to close learning centres and lay off teachers. These decisions were made despite the education sector needing US$72 million annually to serve 437 000 children. The gap between needs and available resources widened, threatening to erase progress made since 2017.

ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND NGOS

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

UNHCR leads the refugee response alongside Bangladesh's Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner. Its 2024 Annual Results Report notes that 305 869 refugee children aged 3–18 (including 154 626 girls) had access to education across all 33 camps and on Bhasan Char through various education partners. Of these, only 14 777 students accessed early childhood, primary, secondary and informal education programmes. UNHCR tracks progress through indicators: the proportion of children and young people enrolled in primary education among refugees was estimated at 89.71 % in 2024, up from a baseline of 87.04 %. However, secondary enrolment was just 9.17 %, reflecting the lack of post primary opportunities. UNHCR introduced the Pearson Edexcel curriculum for kindergarten and grade 1 in two registered camps, benefiting 2 391 students. It also supports volunteer teachers, community education committees and parental engagement. Nevertheless, UNHCR emphasises that education activities were under funded at 55 % of their requirements.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF co leads the Education Sector Working Group and has played a pivotal role in establishing learning centres and developing the LCFA. It has supported the recruitment and training of thousands of volunteer teachers and produced teaching materials. UNICEF piloted the Myanmar curriculum for grades 6–9 and collaborates with the British Council and Pearson to align instruction with international standards. However, funding

cuts forced UNICEF to suspend thousands of learning centres in 2025, leaving many children without schooling. UNICEF advocates for gender responsive facilities, psychosocial support and inclusive education for children with disabilities. It also works with partners to ensure home based, caregiver led learning during emergencies.

Education Cannot Wait (ECW)

Education Cannot Wait, a global fund for education in emergencies, supports a multi year resilience programme in Bangladesh. ECW funds safe and inclusive learning environments, recruits and trains teachers and promotes equitable and inclusive education. Its interventions include providing separate facilities for girls, recruiting female teachers and offering mental health and psychosocial support training to educators. ECW's programme emphasises community participation and aims to increase access to education in both refugee and host communities. ECW also invests in home based learning and caregiver support to ensure continuity during closures.

Non-Governmental Organizations and Community Initiatives

Numerous NGOs contribute to education, including BRAC, Save the Children, Plan International, Caritas Switzerland and local organisations. They establish learning facilities, train teachers, provide materials and advocate for policy changes. Community led schools–organised by refugees themselves–offer alternative education with a more rigorous curriculum and longer hours than humanitarian learning centres. These schools hire teachers who completed secondary education and specialise in different subjects, but they lack official recognition and must charge fees. Without accreditation, students cannot receive certificates or transition to higher education. NGOs therefore lobby the government to recognise community schools and integrate them into official programming. They also support initiatives targeting adolescent girls, including life skills training and campaigns against early marriage.

Interventions and Programmes

The primary mode of education delivery in the camps is through learning centres. Each centre typically consists of a small room (10×15 feet) with a dirt or bamboo floor, simple roofing and limited ventilation. Children attend two hour shifts because of space constraints. Community based learning facilities (CBLFs) are larger structures that can serve multiple age groups and provide a space for community meetings. Cross sectoral shared learning facilities (CSSLFs) combine education with other services such as

nutrition or health. By 2023 the combination of learning centres, CBLFs and CSSLFs exceeded 6 000 units.

Curriculum development

Implementing an appropriate curriculum has been contentious. Initially, the LCFA served as an interim solution; however, its limited scope and lack of certification hindered progression. After sustained advocacy, Bangladesh allowed a pilot of the Myanmar curriculum in 2020. Teachers from the Rohingya community were trained to deliver the curriculum at lower secondary level. In 2022 UNHCR partnered with Pearson and the British Council to pilot the Pearson Edexcel curriculum for kindergarten and grade 1. This initiative aims to provide internationally recognised qualifications but requires significant teacher training and resource investment. Additionally, digital platforms have been explored, including offline tablets preloaded with lessons; yet digital literacy and electricity shortages remain barriers.

Teacher Recruitment and Professional Development

Teacher quality is a decisive factor. Agencies prioritise recruiting teachers from both the host community and refugee population. Criteria include completion of secondary education, proficiency in English and Burmese and community engagement. However, teacher shortages persist. Training programmes cover child protection, psychosocial support, disaster risk reduction and prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. UNHCR supports community education committees, training 1 090 members (441 female) to manage schools and cross cutting issues. Caritas Switzerland's "Essence of Learning" provides ongoing monitoring and parental workshops to improve teaching quality.

Inclusion and Gender Equity

Education programmes increasingly incorporate gender responsive designs. Separate toilets and safe spaces for girls, the recruitment of female teachers and community awareness campaigns encourage parents to keep girls in school. Programmes targeting adolescents address gender based violence, reproductive health and leadership skills. Inclusive education initiatives train teachers to support children with disabilities and incorporate sign language and assistive devices. Despite these efforts, dropout rates remain high, especially among girls after age 13.

Community Participation

Refugee education is rarely sustainable if refugees themselves are merely passive recipients. It requires their active hand in planning and monitoring. We see this clearly in community schools, where refugee-led committees try to shape curricula and maintain facilities. Yet, these initiatives often hit a bureaucratic wall. In Bangladesh, for instance, the government refuses to recognize these committees as legal entities, effectively crippling their influence. This disconnect has led humanitarian agencies to push harder for formal engagement mechanisms that actually empower both refugee and host communities, rather than just paying lip service to participation.

When we look at the academic landscape, the picture is mixed. Palik and Østby (2023) combed through quantitative studies and found that, surprisingly, hard evidence on "what works" is thin. Only a few interventions specifically cash transfers and online learning platforms show proven results. Meanwhile, the challenge isn't limited to resource-poor settings. Mthethwa-Sommers and Kisiara (2015) expose a harsh reality in U.S. schools, where refugee students face relentless bullying based on their accents, race, and religion. The message is clear: access means nothing without a safe, inclusive environment.

This shifts the conversation from "charity" to "rights." In higher education, Class et al. (2023) argue that we need to stop viewing education as a service delivered to refugees and start treating it as a common good co-created with them. But as Dryden-Peterson (2016) points out, a massive gap remains between these universal aspirations and national realities. Until policy reforms bridge the gap between the right to education and the ability to actually use it (like the right to work), programmatic innovations will only go so far.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data on education in the Rohingya camps remain fragmented because of the informal nature of programmes and frequent disruptions. Nevertheless, available figures reveal trends (see Tables 1–4). The preceding sections present the empirical findings relating to access, infrastructure, curriculum, and humanitarian interventions. In the following section, these findings are interpreted through the lens of Fragile State Theory to explain the structural drivers of educational exclusion.

Table 1
Rohingya refugee population and education access in Cox's Bazar, 2017–2024

Year	Approx. refugee population	Notes on education access
2017	~742 000 new arrivals; total refugees in Bangladesh ≈ 900 000	Emergency learning centres set up; informal teaching through LCFA begins; children taught basic literacy and numeracy.
2018	≈ 1 million refugees	LCFA formalised; about 3 200 learning centres operate, serving limited numbers.
2019	≈ 1.1 million (includes newborns)	70 % of learning centres supported by UNICEF; pilot advocacy for Myanmar curriculum begins.
2020	≈ 1.1–1.2 million	COVID-19 closures; pilot introduction of Myanmar curriculum for grades 6–9; digital learning trials; expansion of community-led schools.
2021	≈ 1.2 million	LCFA continues; limited resumption after pandemic; negotiations on curriculum.
2022	≈ 1.25 million	Over 6 000 learning facilities (learning centres, CBLFs and CSSLFs) in camps; pilot Pearson Edexcel curriculum considered.
2023	≈ 1.3 million	Learning facilities remain over 6 000; only 30 % of education targets in JRP met.
2024	≈ 1 million (some departures, births and relocations)	305 869 children aged 3–18 access education across 33 camps and Bhasan Char; primary enrolment 89.71 %, secondary enrolment 9.17 %; donor cuts force closure of thousands of learning centres.

Table 2
Education indicators for Rohingya refugees in 2024

Indicator	Population (refugee children)	Baseline	Actual (2024)	Source
Proportion of children and young people enrolled in primary education	Refugees and asylum-seekers	87.04 %	89.71 %	UNHCR Annual Results Report
Proportion of children and young people enrolled in secondary education	Refugees and asylum-seekers	8.62 %	9.17 %	UNHCR Annual Results Report
Number of children aged 3–18 accessing education services	All camps and Bhasan Char	–	305 869 (154 626 girls)	UNHCR Annual Results Report
Number of students in early childhood, primary, secondary and informal education	Selected camps	–	14 777 (6 799 girls)	UNHCR Annual Results Report
Learning facilities in the camps	All camps	~3 200 (2019)	>6 000 (2022–23)	Hossain (2023)

Note. CBLFs = Community-Based Learning Facilities; CSSLFs = Cross-Sectoral Shared Learning Facilities. The figure 305,869 refers to all refugee children aged 3–18 accessing any form of education service across all 33 camps and Bhasan Char. The figure 14,777 refers only to students enrolled in early childhood, primary, secondary, and informal education programmes in selected camps covered by UNHCR's indicator.

Table 3
Key education programmes and actors (2017–2024)

Programme/actor	Description	Achievements and challenges
Learning Competency Framework and Approach (LCFA)	An informal curriculum developed by UNICEF and partners teaching English, mathematics, Burmese and life skills.	Provided initial education to thousands of children; lacks accreditation, curriculum depth and progression pathways.
Myanmar Curriculum Pilot	Pilot project (from 2020) introducing the Myanmar national curriculum for grades 6–9.	Aligns with refugees' language and facilitates repatriation; limited scale; paused during COVID-19; requires trained teachers and government approval.
Pearson Edexcel Curriculum Pilot	Implemented by UNHCR in two registered camps for kindergarten and grade 1.	Provides internationally recognised curriculum; currently benefits 2 391 students; requires teacher training and resources.
Education Cannot Wait Multi-Year Resilience Programme	Global fund supporting safe, inclusive and quality education.	Funds learning spaces, teacher training and gender-responsive facilities; emphasises community participation and mental health support.
Community-led schools	Schools established and managed by Rohingya refugees.	Offer higher-quality, subject-specialised teaching; lack recognition and funding; charge fees that many families cannot afford.
Caritas Switzerland's "Essence of Learning"	Pedagogical approach providing mental and educational support and parental workshops.	Improves teaching quality and parental engagement; limited coverage.
Teacher training programmes	Conducted by UNICEF, UNHCR and NGOs; cover child protection,	Improves skills of volunteer teachers; however, teacher

Programme/actor	Description	Achievements and challenges
	psychosocial support, disaster risk reduction and gender sensitivity.	shortages and low remuneration persist.

Table 4
Major challenges and recommended interventions

Challenge	Evidence	Recommended interventions
Legal restrictions on formal education	Government policy denies Rohingya formal education and allows only informal LCFA programmes.	Advocate for policy change to recognise refugee children's right to accredited education; negotiate use of Myanmar curriculum and certification; allow enrolment in Bangladeshi schools.
Funding cuts and donor fatigue	Education funding in Bangladesh fell from US$72 million to about US$22 million, causing thousands of learning centres to close.	Increase multi-year, predictable funding; diversify donors; integrate education with development budgets; support community-led schools financially.
Poor infrastructure and teacher shortages	Learning centres lack desks, electricity and structured curricula; volunteers receive little training.	Invest in semi-permanent structures; provide textbooks and teaching materials; expand teacher recruitment and remuneration; offer continuous professional development.
Gender disparities and socio-cultural barriers	Families withdraw girls at puberty and restrict their mobility; shortage of female teachers.	Provide separate facilities and hygiene services; recruit and train female teachers; conduct community outreach promoting girls' education; offer scholarships and incentives.
Security risks and disasters	Violence, abductions and fires disrupt schooling.	Improve camp security through community policing and legal enforcement; build disaster-resilient learning

Challenge	Evidence	Recommended interventions
		facilities; integrate disaster risk reduction into curricula.
Lack of accreditation and progression	LCFA lacks recognised certification; students cannot progress to secondary or tertiary education.	Partner with international examination boards (e.g., Edexcel); formalise community schools; create pathways to tertiary education through scholarships and third-country resettlement.

DISCUSSION: A FRAGILE STATE INTERPRETATION

Fragile State theory gives us a lens to see the Rohingya crisis not just as a humanitarian disaster, but as a double failure of governance. On one side, Myanmar's military violence and stripping of citizenship is a total abdication of the state's duty to protect. On the other, Bangladesh is caught in a bind between helping refugees and protecting its own sovereignty, resulting in a refusal to offer formal education or legal status. This fits the OECD's definition of fragility perfectly: the state simply cannot meet basic societal expectations. In Cox's Bazar, this creates a power vacuum. Where the state steps back, a patchwork of UN agencies and NGOs steps in. While this "pluralistic" model keeps things running, it essentially means authority is fragmented and constantly contested.

This reliance on outsiders is a double-edged sword. To their credit, international organizations have prevented the education system from collapsing entirely UNHCR's 90% enrollment figures for 2024 are proof that scale is possible even in chaos. But this success masks a deeper problem: it lets the host state off the hook. The system is dangerously fragile because it runs on donor cycles, not tax dollars. As we saw in 2025, when funding dries up, the safety net vanishes schools shut down, and teachers are let go. It reveals the limits of community resilience; refugees can build schools, but without legal recognition, they cannot sustain them.

The environment in the camps further proves how governance deficits feed into educational failure. It's not just about a lack of books; it's about a lack of law. Weak enforcement has allowed criminal networks and armed groups to thrive, leading to a spike in killings and abductions that makes schooling dangerous. When you add political instability and the constant threat of extreme weather, you get a cycle of shocks that the weak

infrastructure simply can't handle. Breaking this cycle requires more than just repairing buildings; it requires rebuilding institutions and social trust.

Ultimately, we have to admit that education cannot be fixed in a vacuum. It is inherently political. Teaching children is pointless if they remain legally invisible and economically excluded. Without a clear path to accreditation or employment, education risks becoming a source of frustration rather than hope raising expectations that reality cannot meet. Therefore, the only sustainable solution isn't more classrooms, but a political resolution: ending the persecution in Myanmar or establishing a proper asylum framework in Bangladesh. Anything less is just a temporary patch.

Host Community Impacts and Social Cohesion

Although the Rohingya camps are the most visible face of the crisis, they sit within the broader context of Cox's Bazar district–home to nearly 2.3 million Bangladeshi citizens. The long term presence of over one million refugees has placed enormous pressure on local infrastructure, natural resources and social cohesion. The 2024 Joint Response Plan (JRP) notes that 1.55 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance in the Rohingya crisis, including 544 000 members of the host community. While nearly one million refugees make up the largest group, the JRP targeted 1.35 million people for assistance–346 000 of them from the host community. These figures highlight that the crisis is not confined to the camps; tens of thousands of Bangladeshi households also depend on aid and risk being left behind if assistance is narrowly focused on refugees.

Before 2017, Cox's Bazar already ranked among Bangladesh's poorest districts. Health and education services were limited, and livelihoods were dominated by subsistence farming, fishing and tourism. When the mass influx occurred, local authorities allocated swathes of land for camps, displacing farmers and cutting off access to grazing fields. The sudden population boom drove up prices of food and housing; wages for casual labourers fell as refugees competed for work despite official bans on wage earning. Deforestation accelerated as families collected firewood and bamboo for shelters, leading to soil erosion and flooding. Water sources became polluted, increasing disease risk. In some villages, the ratio of refugees to hosts exceeds 3:1, overwhelming roads, markets and clinics.

Competition over scarce resources has fuelled anti Rohingya sentiment. UNHCR's 2024 report acknowledges that the prolonged presence of refugees has generated resentment among host communities and that targeted development interventions are essential to foster peaceful coexistence. Local politicians have framed the crisis in zero sum terms,

warning that refugees are draining public services and threatening social harmony. In 2023 and 2024, misinformation spread on social media blaming refugees for crime and disease outbreaks. A perception survey cited by UNHCR found that 39 % of refugees felt “a little unsafe” and 19 % felt “totally unsafe” within their blocks; feelings of insecurity were even higher when moving outside immediate communities. These fears go both ways: host community members worry about crime and demographic change, while refugees fear harassment or expulsion.

Table 5

Refugees and host communities in the 2024 JRP

Category	People in need (2024 JRP)	People targeted	Notes
Rohingya refugees/FDMNs	≈1,000,000	1,000,000	Camps in Cox’s Bazar and Bhasan Char
Host community	544,000	346,000	Bangladeshi residents affected by displacement
Total	1,544,000	1,346,000	Funding appeal of US$852.4 million; anti-Rohingya sentiment rising

Education is a central arena where host refugee relations play out. Prior to 2017, schools in Cox’s Bazar were understaffed and overcrowded. The arrival of hundreds of thousands of children exacerbated shortages of teachers, classrooms and learning materials. Donor funding was channelled primarily to camp education, leaving some host community schools feeling neglected. Teachers and parents complained that humanitarian agencies paid better salaries to staff in the camps, creating jealousy and turnover. Conversely, refugees pointed out that Bangladeshi children could attend formal schools and sit national exams while they were denied the same right. To mitigate these tensions, humanitarian actors have increasingly integrated host community support into the education response. The JRP allocates funds for rehabilitating government schools, hiring additional teachers and providing school feeding programmes in neighbouring villages. In 2024 UNHCR reported that of more than 51 000 paid volunteers in camp programmes, 27 % were from the host community. These volunteer opportunities–ranging from teaching assistants to community health workers–offer income and training to local residents while building shared ownership of the response. Infrastructure projects such as road repairs, reforestation and

flood mitigation benefit both groups, demonstrating that refugee aid can deliver public goods. However, funding remains insufficient relative to need. The JRP's appeal of US$852.4 million was only partly funded, leaving gaps in both refugee and host programmes.

The table 5 summarises the scale of need and assistance for refugees and host communities in the 2024 JRP. It underscores the interdependence of humanitarian and development responses.

Addressing social cohesion therefore requires a "whole of society" approach. Investments in education, healthcare, infrastructure and livelihoods must deliberately include host communities to counter perceptions that refugees receive undue benefits. Community dialogues, joint youth clubs and inter faith activities can build trust and dismantle stereotypes. At the policy level, the Government of Bangladesh should incorporate refugee aid into district development plans, ensuring that the crisis becomes an opportunity to upgrade services for all (Stathopoulou et al., 2025). Without such inclusive strategies, host refugee tensions risk undermining educational gains and fuelling fragility.

Comparative Perspectives and Global Policy Frameworks

The denial of formal education to Rohingya children in Bangladesh stands in sharp contrast to international norms and practices in other refugee contexts. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) obliges states to provide free and compulsory primary education and to ensure access to secondary education on the basis of equal opportunity.

Compact on Refugees (GCR), adopted in 2018, calls on host countries to include refugees in national education systems, provide accredited qualifications and ensure that displacement does not deprive children of learning. Bangladesh is a party to the CRC and endorsed the GCR, yet the government's policies have long prevented Rohingya children from enrolling in Bangladeshi schools or sitting national exams. Until 2021 formal education above grade 8 was banned; only in 2023 did authorities allow the Myanmar curriculum up to grade 10. By contrast, Jordan and Lebanon–countries with far weaker economies–have opened their public schools to Syrian refugees through double shift systems, although quality and enrolment challenges persist. Turkey has enrolled more than 700 000 Syrian children in Turkish schools and introduced bilingual transition curricula. Uganda's Self Reliance Strategy allows refugees to work and access education alongside nationals.

These examples illustrate that inclusive policies are feasible even under strain. Opponents argue that granting formal education would

incentivise refugees to settle permanently and strain public finances. The Bangladeshi government emphasises that the Rohingya crisis is temporary and that education should prepare children for repatriation. It also cites national security concerns and fears of cultural assimilation. Fragile State theory explains such positions as attempts to preserve sovereignty in the face of weak institutions.

Yet exclusion has heavy costs: uneducated youth are more vulnerable to radicalisation, trafficking and child marriage; they lack the skills needed for reconstruction if repatriation occurs. Denying refugees access to national curricula also violates their rights under the CRC and undermines Bangladesh's commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 4 on quality education.

Comparing Bangladesh with other host countries highlights the diversity of approaches. Lebanon initially resisted integrating Syrian refugees into public schools but eventually allowed enrolment through the "RACE" framework, supported by the World Bank. Kenya granted refugees limited access to national examinations but continued to restrict movement. In Thailand, Burmese migrant children attend learning centres run by NGOs, similar to the LCFA, but the Thai government increasingly recognises these schools and issues completion certificates. The Bangladesh case is unusual not only because of the scale of exclusion but also because refugees are barred from learning the language of the host country; they study in English and Burmese, which further segregates them.

Recent research across Asia underscores both the common challenges faced by displaced children and the variations in national responses. Prabaningtyas et al. (2023) document how a 2019 circular letter in Indonesia permitted refugee children to attend local schools but that the COVID 19 pandemic and digital divides subsequently undermined access; refugees and NGOs adopted online learning strategies to sustain education. In Malaysia, Lee and Hoque (2024) report that non formal learning centres run by UNHCR and NGOs are the primary providers of education, yet they lack financial and human resources, secondary schooling is scarce and cultural norms restrict girls' access. Loganathan et al. (2023) identify additional barriers such as citizenship documentation requirements, unlicensed centres, financial constraints and restrictive cultural norms, and argue that granting refugees the right to work would significantly improve educational access.

Ali et al. (2024) emphasise that Malaysia's refusal to sign the 1951 Refugee Convention denies Rohingya children access to public schools; they therefore rely on alternative learning centres, and poverty, cultural differences and stigma further impede attendance. Beyond Asia, Greene et al. (2023)

provide case studies from California where refugee led advocacy and teacher training programmes promote social and curricular inclusion and challenge deficit models. Martuscelli et al. (2024) show that many Rohingya refugees in Malaysia aspire to resettle in third countries to secure legal status and educational opportunities, though preferences vary among resettlement, return and family reunification. Together, these academic studies demonstrate that while contexts differ, exclusion from formal education and lack of rights remain persistent obstacles, and they highlight innovative responses that can inform policy in Bangladesh.

The normative landscape is evolving. The Global Compact on Education in Emergencies and the Safe Schools Declaration call for protecting education from attack and investing in humanitarian learning. Humanitarian donors increasingly insist on linking emergency education to national systems and long term development. The ODI & GAGE (2024) midline study underscores that Rohingya children's denial of education contravenes the UNCRC and the Global Compact on Refugees. It argues that Bangladesh's strategy of containment and eventual repatriation runs counter to the principle of the best interests of the child. Thus, advocacy should focus not only on funding but also on aligning national policies with international obligations. Legal reforms to allow refugees to sit accredited examinations, recruit qualified teachers and recognise refugee run schools would bring Bangladesh closer to global standards and reduce fragility.

Future Outlook and Scenarios

Looking ahead, the Rohingya education crisis will be shaped by geopolitical developments, policy choices and donor commitments. Fragile State theory suggests that prolonged displacement without durable solutions exacerbates instability. Four broad scenarios are possible:

Continued encampment: Under current policies, refugees remain confined to camps in Cox's Bazar and Bhasan Char, with humanitarian agencies providing informal education. UNHCR's 2024 report shows that 305 869 refugee children aged 3–18 accessed some form of education, but only a small fraction could progress beyond primary level or obtain recognised certificates. Funding gaps in 2025 forced closures of more than 6 400 learning centres, threatening to reduce enrolment drastically. Reliance on paid volunteers–over 51 000 individuals in 2024, including 24 039 refugees and 7 279 host community members–means that programmes depend on predictable incentives. If donors do not step up, educational services may shrink further. Prolonged encampment also fuels crime and

insecurity: surveys indicate that nearly 60 % of refugees feel unsafe in or around their communities. Without pathways to higher education or employment, a generation may become disillusioned.

Voluntary repatriation: Both Bangladesh and Myanmar assert that the "preferred solution" is repatriation to Rakhine state. Yet continued conflict between the Arakan Army and Myanmar Armed Forces, reported refoulement of new arrivals and the absence of citizenship guarantees make safe return unlikely in the short term. Even if repatriation were possible, children educated under the LCFA or Myanmar curriculum may face difficulty integrating into Myanmar's formal system. Preparatory programmes could help align curricula and provide psychosocial support, but these require resources. Until conditions in Myanmar improve and accountability for past abuses is established, repatriation will remain largely aspirational.

Relocation and third country solutions: To ease congestion in Cox's Bazar, the Government of Bangladesh plans to relocate up to 75 000 refugees to the coastal island of Bhasan Char. While infrastructure on the island includes cyclone shelters and fish farms, critics argue that the isolated location and restrictions on movement will exacerbate exclusion. Meanwhile, resettlement and complementary pathways are scaling up: UNHCR resettled 3 195 refugees in 2024–an order of magnitude higher than 239 in 2023–and facilitated 51 departures through educational and family reunification pathways. Pilot education pathways to Japan and Canada provide scholarships to Rohingya youth. However, these numbers remain minuscule relative to the population; at current rates, it would take centuries to resettle all refugees. Expanding scholarships, labour mobility schemes and family reunification could offer hope to thousands, but such initiatives depend on political will in third countries.

Integration and self-reliance: A fourth scenario involves granting refugees greater freedom of movement, access to national education and the right to work, similar to policies in Uganda. The UNHCR report notes that advocacy is ongoing for more flexible livelihood policies, including approval for refugees to run small businesses and marketing camp based products. Yet progress is slow; only 8 % of working age Rohingya women engaged in any income generating activity in 2024 despite participation in skills training. Integration would require amending the Foreigners Act and adopting a national asylum framework, politically sensitive steps in Bangladesh. Some

argue that partial integration could take the form of long term residency rights, local language instruction and recognition of refugee qualifications. Such measures would enable Rohingya youth to contribute to the host economy, reduce aid dependency and build resilience. They would also benefit the host community by creating jobs and markets. However, integration challenges entrenched narratives of temporariness and raises fears about demographic change.

These scenarios are not mutually exclusive; elements of each may unfold concurrently. For instance, some refugees may repatriate or resettle while others remain in camps. In every scenario, education remains central: it prepares refugees for return, enables self reliance and supports integration. The future of Rohingya children therefore hinges on whether stakeholders invest in inclusive, accredited and sustainable education that bridges humanitarian and development agendas. Table 6 summarises the scenarios, key drivers and their implications for education.

Table 6
Summarises the scenarios

Scenario	Key drivers	Potential outcomes for education	Policy considerations
Continued encampment	Restricted movement, donor fatigue, insecurity	Limited informal education; high dropout; lost generation; dependence on volunteers	Increase funding; protect volunteers; improve safety; expand Edexcel or equivalent accreditation
Voluntary repatriation	Improvements in Myanmar's security, citizenship rights, bilateral agreements	Return to Rakhine; need for bridging curricula and psychosocial support	Advocate for safe return; prepare children academically and mentally; ensure rights upon return
Relocation and third-country solutions	Congestion relief, international solidarity, scholarships	Some children relocated to Bhasan Char or resettled; education pathways abroad	Monitor human rights on Bhasan Char; scale up scholarships and family reunification; maintain camp education quality

Scenario	Key drivers	Potential outcomes for education	Policy considerations
Integration and self-reliance	Legal reforms, host community acceptance, economic opportunities	Refugees attend national schools; access to work; improved livelihoods	Reform Foreigners Act; adopt asylum framework; invest in language and vocational training; promote social cohesion

By mapping these scenarios, we underscore the importance of proactive planning rather than passive waiting. Regardless of the path, rights based education must remain a cornerstone of the response. Failure to invest in the human capital of Rohingya children today will reverberate for decades, both in Myanmar and Bangladesh, and will perpetuate fragility.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Rohingya education crisis in Cox's Bazar epitomises the challenges of delivering basic rights in a fragile context. The influx of over 700 000 refugees in 2017 created an unprecedented humanitarian emergency. By 2024 roughly one million Rohingya refugees remained in camps, with children comprising about half the population. Humanitarian agencies established thousands of learning centres and achieved high primary enrolment rates, but programmes remain informal, underfunded and vulnerable to donor fatigue. Legal restrictions prevent formal education and employment, leaving a generation without recognised credentials. Funding cuts in 2025 forced closures of learning centres and highlighted the fragility of aid dependent education. Violence, disasters and socio cultural barriers further undermine access and quality.

To prevent a lost generation and build resilience, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

Recognise refugees' right to accredited education: The Government of Bangladesh should allow the full Myanmar curriculum and internationally recognised programmes (e.g., Edexcel) and permit refugees to sit for examinations. Accreditation will ensure that learning counts toward future schooling or employment and support eventual repatriation or integration. Legislative reforms should align with international human rights instruments guaranteeing education without discrimination.

Secure predictable, multi-year funding: Donor governments and multilateral agencies should commit to multi- year financing that covers

both humanitarian and development needs. Education budgets must be protected from global funding volatility. Funding should also support community led schools and compensate teachers adequately to reduce reliance on unpaid volunteers.

Invest in infrastructure and teacher training: Semi permanent learning facilities with adequate classrooms, sanitation and electricity are needed. Teacher recruitment should prioritise training female and refugee teachers and provide continuous professional development in child protection, psychosocial support and disaster risk reduction.

Promote gender equity and social inclusion: Programmes should provide separate facilities for girls, recruit female teachers and engage parents through awareness campaigns. Scholarships and stipends can encourage families to keep girls in school. Inclusive education must address the needs of children with disabilities.

Enhance security and disaster preparedness: Strengthen camp security through community policing and collaboration with law enforcement agencies to curb criminal gangs and protect children. Learning facilities should be built to withstand fires and weather events, and disaster risk reduction should be integrated into curricula.

Formalise refugee participation: Refugees should have a formal role in education planning and implementation. Community education committees should be legally recognised, and refugee led schools should be integrated into the official education sector. Participation increases ownership and sustainability.

Link education to durable solutions: Education interventions should be part of a broader strategy that includes legal status, livelihoods and third country solutions. Programmes such as scholarships for tertiary education and labour mobility pathways can provide hope and reduce dependency.

Address root causes: International actors must continue to pressure Myanmar to end persecution of the Rohingya and create conditions for voluntary, safe and dignified return. At the same time, Bangladesh should adopt a national asylum framework to protect refugees' rights. Without resolving these structural issues, education programmes will remain palliative.

Future research should adopt mixed-method and longitudinal designs to track children's learning progression over time and to evaluate the long-term impact of funding volatility on educational access. Comparative studies across South and Southeast Asian refugee contexts such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia could illuminate how different policy regimes

mediate Fragile State constraints. Additionally, participatory research involving Rohingya educators, adolescents, and community school operators would generate more grounded insights into feasible accreditation pathways and governance reforms.

By situating the Rohingya education crisis within a Fragile State framework, this paper underscores the systemic nature of the challenge. It highlights the need for comprehensive, rights based approaches that go beyond temporary humanitarian aid. Only by combining political reform, sustainable financing and community empowerment can Bangladesh and the international community ensure that Rohingya children and adolescents receive the education they deserve and contribute to a more resilient future.

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JIA-YING LYU is an Assistant Professor at the School of Finance and Accounting, Fuzhou University of International Studies and Trade. His research focuses on financial technology, cryptocurrency governance, international political economy, and the political economy of East Asia. He has published in peer-reviewed journals across the fields of finance, economics, and regional studies, and his recent work examines emerging technologies, digital governance,and financial regulation.

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