

REFUGEE STUDIES UNIT

Overview

Background

In the 21st century, new challenges including conflict, fragility and climate crisis threaten to impede the strides made toward economic development over the past 50 years. While Bangladesh has improved its global ranking on the Fragile State Index, its position on the refugee and internally displaced persons (IDPs) component of the Index has deteriorated in recent years.

Three factors - population explosion, climate change, and conflict - have displaced a large number of people in Bangladesh and in its borderland regions. By 2050, it is projected that up to 13.3 million Bangladeshis may be displaced due to the impacts of climate change. While Bangladesh is a generally cohesive nation, deep ethnic and religious fractures within its neighboring countries leave the nation highly vulnerable to future refugee influxes. The country already hosts the biggest and most densely populated refugee settlement in the world.

Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ), Brac University envisions supporting Bangladesh's humanitarian and development sectors to build expertise and skills for peacebuilding, justice and social cohesion address these looming threats. In order to support the Rohingya humanitarian response as a knowledge partner, CPJ began developing a Refugee Studies Unit (RSU) in 2018 to generate knowledge, understanding and capacities for the intersecting crises of statelessness, displacement and forced migration affecting Bangladesh.

As a central element of CPJ's strategic plan for 2021-2023, the RSU will build a research agenda and focus on four thematic areas in order to ensure appropriate and empirically informed responses by policymakers, donors and the humanitarian community that meet the needs of refugees and those living in fragile settings.

Thematic areas

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

CPJ recognizes that in-depth understanding of refugee issues in Bangladesh is generated vis-a-vis an ongoing process of engagement with camp residents themselves. Since 2018, CPJ has led initiatives that improve civic participation, community learning, and refugees' ability to voice their own needs.

Through a process-oriented approach that emphasizes qualitative insight, CPJ stands behind its teams of camp-based refugee outreach volunteers, who consult with other community members to understand their evolving views, concerns, needs and requests. These are in turn amplified amongst policy and decision-makers.

CONTEXT & SITUATION ANALYSIS

CPJ supports the efforts of humanitarian and policy actors to understand shifting humanitarian concerns, conflict dynamics, social tensions and fragility. By producing in-depth analyses based on qualitative and quantitative research, CPJ enriches responsible actors' understanding of ever-shifting crisis dynamics and root causes, guiding them to work with greater sensitivity and responsiveness amongst crisis-affected populations.

RESEARCH & KNOWLEDGE REPOSITORY

In addition to supporting the analytical needs of key actors, CPJ carries out its own research agenda as an independent, non-implementing partner positioned to critically examine refugee issues. This independence enables CPJ to consider policy issues in a focused manner that transcends the mandates of humanitarian funders and other stakeholders. The RSU also functions as a knowledge repository mandated to catalogue and help disseminate related publications by other institutions, with a focus on social and applied research.

HIGHER LEARNING IN FRAGILE SETTINGS

Refugees and IDPs have a right to education, which can be a powerful tool for introducing tolerance, peace and conflict resolution. Global research shows that in a forced migration setting, higher education may constitute a psychosocial intervention as much as an educational program. As an academic institution, CPJ is positioned to break new ground and pave educational pathways for refugee and host community learners, and piloted higher learning initiatives in Cox's Bazar in 2019 and 2020. CPJ and its partner institutions within Brac University advocate for higher education approaches such as distance and blended learning and ongoing internationalization of the university to bolster the inclusion of stateless and refugee learners. CPJ is currently conducting a feasibility study on the provision of higher education and blended learning to Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, and identify pathways and options for Brac University to provide these opportunities.