The Role of Faith in the Humanitarian Response

Strengthening Community Participation
and Engagement through Religious Leaders
in Rohingya Camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

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Abbreviations

AAP	Accountability to Affected Populations
BITA	Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CAP	Communication, Advocacy and Partnerships
C4D	Communication for Development
CCP	Johns Hopkins Center for Communication Programs
CwC	Communication with Communities
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
FBO	Faith-based Organization
IEC	International Education Centre
IFB	Islamic Foundation Bangladesh
ISCG	Inter Sector Coordination Group
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
SPEAR	Social Policy, Evaluation, Analytics and Research
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Introduction

The onset of the Rohingya refugee crisis in August 2017 irrevocably changed the present and the future of hundreds of thousands of children, women and men from the Rohingya community and introduced the entire Cox's Bazar district, one of the poorest areas in Bangladesh, to an unprecedented crisis and a new social reality. The situation was so dire that a month later, on 20 September 2017, UNICEF activated a Level 3 emergency response[1] – the highest level of alarm.[2] Together with the Government and other humanitarian partners, UNICEF immediately responded to provide life-saving assistance and protection to the newly arrived Rohingya children and their families, also taking a lead role in health; nutrition; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); child protection; and education – areas that are fundamental to the survival, protection and wellbeing of the refugee community. UNICEF also played a strong supporting role in communication for development (C4D) interventions as well as community engagement and accountability to the affected population.

Background

The Rohingya community experienced decades of military crackdowns, extreme violence and protracted discrimination in their native Myanmar. In August 2017, entire villages were forcibly displaced, fleeing their homes to escape attacks, sexual violence and targeted atrocities. They left their homes and jobs and, in many cases, were separated from family members. Many lost their lives. What sustained them throughout their hazardous journey and helped them overcome daunting challenges on their way to Bangladesh, where they sought refuge, was a strong sense of preserving their identity, and protecting their children and surviving family members from further harm.

The majority of Rohingya refugees are Sunni/ Hanafi Muslims, for whom Islam is an integral part of their cultural identity and social life. Religious leaders (such as an imam, *hafeza*[3], muezzin[4], molvi[5]) are highly respected in the Rohingya community and, together with Islamic institutions, they have a powerful influence on individual and collective perceptions and behaviours.[6] Research conducted by UNICEF and the Institute of Development Studies[7] provides convincing evidence confirming that religion is one of the most influential factors in the Rohingya community's wellbeing, contributing to protection, health and education, as well as to social cohesion and peaceful coexistence in a humanitarian context. The Humanitarian Policy Group's field research conducted in 2018 and 2019[8] further highlights that the Rohingya community places high value on religion and religious practices as a key aspect of their identity and dignity. Therefore, to uphold the dignity of individuals and of the community as a whole, and to positively impact the wellbeing of those affected by the emergency, the humanitarian response must take into consideration the role of religion in the life of the Rohingya community.

The difficulties that Rohingya refugees face in the camps is exacerbated by gender imbalance and by their adherence to traditional cultural norms, as well as the circulation of misinformation and rumours. For example, efforts to vaccinate against diphtheria were compromised because many believed that children would die if vaccinated or would be reborn as a non-Muslim. According to a widely held belief, miscarriage is thought to be caused by *jinn* (spirits), and *jinn* are also thought to cause diseases such as polio or epilepsy, or harass women and girls when they use latrines. Another prevailing belief in the community is that girls in their teens are better suited to have children, and that during menstruation women and girls should not step out of their shelters (as part of *purdah*, the practice of female seclusion).[9] Such beliefs and norms are prevalent in the camps and can undermine a successful humanitarian response. Religious leaders have a trusted relationship with community members and are well placed to positively influence beliefs and behaviours that otherwise may deprive the most vulnerable groups of life-saving assistance and other services.[10]

A number of humanitarian organizations have developed strategies and guidelines for collaboration with religious leaders and faith-based organizations (FBOs) in complex humanitarian contexts.[11] UNICEF's partnership with religious leaders and FBOs during the Rohingya humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh is an example of such efforts. In order to disseminate life-saving messages, promote positive behaviour change, build social cohesion and prevent harmful child care practices among Rohingya refugees living in the camps of Ukhiya and Teknaf in Cox's Bazar district and in host communities, UNICEF partnered with religious leaders and FBOs, as well as with civil society organizations.

Community leaders discussing their problems and solutions in the community consultation meeting.

The context in Cox's Bazar

Surveys and assessments undertaken to inform the emergency response have confirmed that Rohingya refugees prefer to access information and services through direct face-to-face communication.[12] The low rate of literacy among the refugee population means that communication with aid workers has been difficult and, in some cases, life-saving messages did not reach those who needed assistance or the messages were misunderstood. Dire conditions combined with the lack of alternative channels of communication increased the community's dependence on traditional sources of information. A survey[13] conducted by Innovations for Poverty Action in collaboration with UNICEF in 2018 and 2019 confirmed that religious leaders are among the most trusted actors for communicating humanitarian information. Husbands and other male family members relay the information they receive from imams to the female family members who do not have direct access to imams.[14] The percentage of the refugee community who see masjid[15] sermons as their most trusted source of information for receiving messages jumped from 52 per cent in 2018 to 70 per cent in 2019, and a quarter of the community members in the camps still send their children to *hafez khanas* and madrassas, religious

Islamic educational centers. In addition, religion and religious leaders play an essential role in peaceful co-existence and reconciliation in cases of conflict.[16] A recent survey by Ground Truth Solutions[17] confirms that among the Rohingya and Bangladeshi communities, religion is identified as the key factor in facilitating harmonious relations (76 per cent).

During a group discussion, two Rohingya refugees emphasized the role of religion as a key factor in social cohesion and as a trusted source of information in the camps. One, a young Rohingya refugee named Jafar, explained why it is crucial to engage religious leaders in support of humanitarian assistance, "We are not clear about NGOs or [aid] organizations. It is Allah who gives the most accurate information and helps us understand better."[18] After speaking, he looked to another participant in the group for approval. Ahammed, a teacher of the Qur'an and Arabic, and a well-respected figure in the community nodded, "We pray [to] Allah for his guidance, we pray [to] him to go back [to Myanmar] safe, [to] feel proud of our identity again. We are all Muslims, brothers and sisters; so we trust and help each other so that nobody is left alone here [in the camp]."[19]

Faith-based organizations

Faith-based organizations (FBOs), sometimes referred to as faith-inspired organizations, are among the most visible religious actors in humanitarian and development contexts and operate in much the same way as other non-governmental organizations in supporting humanitarian initiatives and development programmes. Grounded in the tenets and values of a particular faith, FBOs can establish credibility and authority with local religious communities and, in many instances, have locally connected operational networks that can be mobilized for the response.

From UNICEF's *Partnering with Religious Communities for Children.*

Religious leaders

Men and women with a formal affiliation to a religion or spiritual path have considerable influence both within their communities and among the broader civil society. Examples include clerics, imams, lamas, monks, nuns, rabbis, traditional indigenous spiritual guides such as shamans and sukias, and lay religious leaders.

From UNDP's 'Guidelines on Engaging with Faith-Based Organizations and Religious Leaders'.

The shared values and dignity upheld through religious beliefs make religious leaders and faith-based organizations an invaluable resource to facilitate community mobilization, foster social cohesion, motivate behaviour change and endorse collaboration within a humanitarian context.

Collaboration with Islamic Foundation Bangladesh

UNICEF's collaboration with religious leaders and faith-based organizations in Bangladesh is longstanding. On 7 June 2017, two months prior to the arrival of Rohingya refugees in August of that year, UNICEF and the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh (IFB),[20] a Directorate under the Ministry of Religious Affairs, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the period of 2017–2020. The MoU provides a solid foundation for strengthening the partnership with IFB on development and humanitarian actions and initiatives[21] at national and sub-national levels. Following the signing of the MoU, UNICEF and community mobilization partners engaged imams and other religious leaders in a wide range of community mobilization activities in Cox's Bazar to expand outreach and strengthen accountability to the Rohingya refugee community.

Religious leaders as change agents

Three months after their arrival in Cox's Bazar, in November 2017, Rohingya community leaders and imams participated in an advocacy meeting to help scale up hygiene promotion, immunization as part of the Expanded Programme of Immunization/measles vaccination, nutrition interventions and vitamin A supplementation among the refugee community.[22] During the first year of the response, UNICEF and its community mobilization partners, including the non-

governmental organizations PULSE[23] and BRAC,[24] oriented about 1,000 imams (as of May 2018) through advocacy and consultation meetings on different topics, ranging from basic hygiene practices, open defecation, safe latrine uses and cyclone preparedness to culturally sensitive issues such as child marriage and gender-based violence.[25] The imams, in turn, disseminated critical messages to families in their respected blocks[26] and mobilized community members through religious dialogue, resources and rituals, including khutba (Friday sermon), masjid announcements and other religious practices. In January 2019, another 287 imams were sensitized on key nutrition services. This is in line with recent findings that highlight the importance of religious leaders in identifying malnourished children and encouraging their critical care and support.[27]

Keeping away disease outbreaks

Approximately 3,000 religious leaders have been engaged in mobilizing the affected community of Rohingya refugees during 15 campaigns to prevent and respond to disease outbreaks, carried out since September 2017. The campaigns included anti-diphtheria vaccination, oral cholera and acute watery diarrhoea vaccination, varicella prevention and response, dengue awareness and awareness raising during nutrition and breastfeeding action weeks. During these campaigns, religious leaders played a catalytic role across the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, taking initiative in local level planning, mobilization, advocacy, consultations and sermons during prayers in the mosques and maktabs.[28]

"Engage imams in the campaigns and arrange cascade trainings by Bangladeshi imams for Rohingya imams to transfer knowledge," recommends Maheshkhali Upazila, field supervisor at the Islamic Foundation.

Engaging communities through religious leaders

Religious leaders have also been actively engaged in outreach to the communities they serve, in order to provide knowledge and information on humanitarian issues, and to positively influence social cohesion and behaviour change. Their efforts were reinforced through concrete, systematic, context-specific, tailor-made messages, as well as through direct participation in community mobilization, advocacy and decision-making processes. Exploratory consultations with imams in the Rohingya camps and with officials from the Islamic Foundation Bangladesh in Cox's Bazar have reinforced the keen interest of religious leaders in supporting community engagement and social mobilization interventions in both host and refugees communities.[29] To facilitate this process, UNICEF and IFB expanded their collaboration with imams and religious leaders across Rohingya and host communities. The aim was to reach 150,000 people in the Rohingya camps and 50,000 from host communities, including Sadar, Ramu, Ukhiya and Teknaf upazilas (sub-districts) in Cox's Bazar.

Following the recommendation of the IFB national office, the Islamic Foundation of Cox's Bazar held a two-day planning workshop in February 2019, 'Engaging Communities through Religious Leaders'. The workshop was supported by UNICEF and attended by 100 religious leaders – 9 Rohingya imams along with 5 female and 86 male religious leaders from host communities. The participants developed a strategic work plan to scale up community mobilization around

life-saving behaviours in camps and host communities.[30] High-level officers from IFB and UNICEF were present, together with the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner. Workshop sessions focused on a number of critical issues related to nutrition, education, protection, community mobilization, child marriage and reproductive health, providing a forum for open discussion and highlighting how religious leaders can contribute to the wellbeing of the community.

Community consultation meeting is playing an important role in the community by identifying problems themselves and the discussion continues until the problem is solved.

Lessons learned and way forward

- Imams are powerful allies for change, especially in crisis contexts. With proper support and access to information, they can become effective influencers and promote UNICEF and partner efforts to tackle the devastating impact of the crisis. However, religious actors are not a homogenous community, they are a diverse group and sometimes divided over critical issues such as child marriage.[31] Some religious leaders may consider social change introduced by secular organizations as an attack on religion and on their position of authority within the community, making them reluctant to disseminate messages. Further, fundamental religious groups may resist changes to social norms and instead promote existing norms and discourses in relation to harmful practices, male dominancy, patriarchy, child marriage, gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health. It is therefore of critical importance to understand, regularly monitor and carefully assess religious partners' capacity and commitment to the shared values and vision of humanitarian organizations.

- Religious teachings, practices, tools and other resources present an important opportunity for mobilizing communities and promoting sustainable behaviour change, especially in a context where adherence to religion is considered intrinsic to a community's identity. However, those resources are open to interpretation due to the different schools of thought within the same faith. It is therefore important to monitor how religious resources are utilized in disseminating messages on sensitive issues during religious practices, rituals and sermons.

- To avoid misinterpretations and ensure uniformity on key humanitarian messages, information and messages on sensitive issues must be specific, clear and effectively communicated through advocacy meetings with religious leaders.

- Despite the continuous support of community volunteers, religious leaders face difficulties in finalizing the specific content of key messages. Close volunteer support, refresher workshops, practical trainings and systematic follow-up can be useful in addressing this challenge.

- Communication materials prepared for religious leaders should be produced and delivered in a timely manner with regular follow-up, as case definitions may be revised or change significantly during the humanitarian response.

Endnotes

1   United Nations Children's Fund, 'Evaluation of UNICEF's Response to the Rohingya Refugee Crisis in Bangladesh', Volume 1, UNICEF, New York, November 2018, p. 15, <www.unicef.org/evaldatabase/files/UNICEF-Rohingya_Response_Evaluation_VOLUME_I-2018-003.pdf>, accessed 17 December 2019.

2   For United Nations procedures applied in different levels of emergencies, see United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 'System-Wide Level 3 (L3) Responses', <www.unocha.org/where-we-work/current-emergencies>, accessed 14 March 2019.

3   A *hafez* is a person who knows the entire Qur'an by heart. *Hafeza* is the female equivalent.

4   A muezzin is the person appointed at a mosque to recite the call to prayer.

5   A molvi is the head of a madrassa, religious school.

6   Girls Not Brides, 'Working with Religious Leaders to Address Child Marriage', Girls Not Brides, April 2019, <www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Working-with-religious-leaders-Girls-Not-Brides-2019.pdf>, accessed 30 December 2019.

7   Ripoll, Santiago, 'Social and Cultural Factors Shaping Health and Nutrition, Wellbeing and Protection of the Rohingya Within a Humanitarian Context', Social Science in Humanitarian Action, October 2017, <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/bitstream/handle/20.500.12413/13328/Ripoll_2017_Social_and_cultural_factors_wellbeing_and_protection_of_the_Rohingya.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y >.

8   Holloway, Kerrie, and Lilianne Fan, 'Dignity and the Displaced Rohingya in Bangladesh', Humanitarian Policy Group Working Paper, Overseas Development Institute, August 2018, <www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12362.pdf>.
    For case studies and examples from different humanitarian contexts, see Mosel, Irina, and Kerrie Holloway, 'Dignity and Humanitarian Action in Displacement', Humanitarian Policy Group Report, Overseas Development Institute, March 2019, <www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12627.pdf>.

9   Ripoll, 'Social and Cultural Factors'.

10 United Nations Children's Fund, *Partnering with Religious Communities for Children,* UNICEF, New York, January 2012, <www.unicef.org/about/partnerships/files/Partnering_with_Religious_Communities_for_Children_%28UNICEF%29.pdf>.

11 For some examples, see *Partnering with Religious Communities;* United Nations Population Fund, 'Guidelines for Engaging Faith-¬based Organisations (FBOs) as Agents of Change', UNFPA, New York, 2009, <www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/fbo_engagement.pdf>; and United Nations Development Programme, 'Guidelines on Engaging with Faith-Based Organizations and

Religious Leaders', UNDP, New York, October 2014, <www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/documents/partners/2014_UNDP_Guidelines-on-Engaging-with-FBOs-and-Religious-Leaders_EN.pdf>. For an example of efforts towards Islam's legislation and rules applied to the upbringing and care of children, see *Children in Islam: Their care, upbringing and protection,* book prepared by Al-Azhar University in cooperation with UNICEF in 2005 (an updated version of the book *Child care in Islam*, published in 1985), <www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/children_in_islam_english.pdf>.

[12] Bailey, Nicola, et al., 'How Effective is Communication in the Rohingya Refugee Response? An evaluation of the common service for community', BBC Media Action, September 2018, <www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/reports/asia/bangladesh/rohingya-response>.

[13] Innovations for Poverty Action, 'Current Level of Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices, and Behaviours (KAPB) of the Rohingya Refugees and Host Community in Cox's Bazar: A report on findings from the baseline survey', IPA, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/4._h_c4d_kapb_baseline_survey_full_report_final_ipa_oct_15_18_0.pdf>, submitted to UNICEF 15 October 2018; and Innovations for Poverty Action, 'Midline Survey to Assess/Monitor Current Level of Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices, and Behaviours (KAPB) of the Rohingyas and Host Community in Cox's Bazar', draft report prepared for UNICEF-Bangladesh, IPA, 2019.

[14] Translators without Borders, 'The Language Lesson: What we have learned from communicating with Rohingya refugees', TWB, November 2018, <https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/TWB_Bangladesh_Comprehension_Study_Nov2018.pdf>.

[15] A masjid is a mosque or place of worship for Muslims. It also serves as a place for religious education and public discussion.

[16] United Nations Children's Fund, *A Global Mapping: UNICEF engagement with religious communities,* UNICEF, New York, February 2015, <www.arcworld.org/downloads/UNICEF_engagement.pdf>.

[17] Ground Truth Solutions, 'Rohingya and Host Communities: Social cohesion', June 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Bangladesh_rohingya_host_socialcohesion_062019.pdf>.

[18] All names of the refugee and host community members quoted in this case study have been changed to protect their identities.

[19] Group discussion and interviews with adult Rohingya refugees, Balukhali refugee camps, Cox's Bazar, 9 February 2019.

[20] The Islamic Foundation Bangladesh has a large network of imams (100,000) in all upazilas and unions across Bangladesh.

[21] These initiatives include curriculum development; training and capacity building of imams, mass education teachers and religious leaders; research and publications; and community engagement and media-based interventions to promote positive behaviours and social norms.

22 United Nations Children's Fund, 'Bangladesh Humanitarian Situation Report No. 11 (Rohingya Influx)', UNICEF, Dhaka, 19 November 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ UNICEF%20Bangladesh%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20No.11%20-%2019%20 November%202017.pdf>, accessed 2 January 2020.

23 PULSE-Bangladesh is a local non-governmental organization, founded in Cox's Bazar district after the devastating cyclone (Ayla) in 2008 to address unmet needs of the community. For more details see <www.pulsebd.org>.

24 BRAC is an international development organization based in Bangladesh, founded in 1972, after the country's independence. The organization operates across Bangladesh and other countries in Asia and Africa. For more information see <www.bracinternational.nl>.

25 'UNICEF Bangladesh C4D Approach and Examples', PowerPoint document,prepared by Yasmin Khan and Mamunul Haque and presented at a 2018 global webinar on UNICEF's Emergency Preparedness Platform.

26 A single block covers about 100 households in the camps.

27 United Nations Children's Fund, 'Bangladesh Humanitarian Situation Report No. 46 (Rohingya Influx)', UNICEF, Dhaka, 10 January 2019, <www.unicef.org/appeals/files/UNICEF_Bangladesh_Humanitarian_ Situation_Report_31_Dec_2018.pdf> accessed 26 May 2019.

28 Maktabs are schools or educational institutions for Islamic education for children.

29 UNICEF's 2018 strategy note on engaging and mobilizing imams and other religious leaders through community engagement in Cox's Bazar.

30 United Nations Children's Fund, 'Bangladesh Humanitarian Situation Report No. 48 (Rohingya Influx)', UNICEF, Dhaka, 17 March 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNICEF%20 Bangladesh%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20No.%2048.pdf>, accessed 2 January 2020.

31 *A Global Mapping.*

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