



Art Brings Light into the Darkness

UNICEF-supported Community Arts Projects in Rohingya Camps

This is one of a series of case studies based on UNICEF-supported communication, community engagement and accountability activities as part of the larger humanitarian response to the Rohingya refugee crisis in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, from September 2017 to December 2019.

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Abbreviations

AAP	Accountability to Affected Populations
ACLAB	Alliance for Cooperation and Legal Aid Bangladesh
BITA	Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CAP	Communication, Advocacy and Partnerships
C4D	Communication for Development
CCP	Centre for Communication Programmes
CwC	Communication with Communities
DRR	Disaster Risk Reduction
IEC	International Education Centre
IFC	Information and Feedback Centre
ISCG	Inter Sector Coordination Group
PMR	Planning, Monitoring and Reporting
SIM	Subscriber Identification Module
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 response¹ – 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 last decade has witnessed an increasing number of community-based art initiatives

that have played a significant role in refugee resettlement and cultural integration. Community arts is a powerful tool that brings refugee girls and boys together with their families and with volunteers, in collaboration with professional artists, and helps them express their experiences and feelings using colours, figures, words and other forms of art. In emergency settings, art can become a catalyst for social change, providing traumatized members of the community a moment of emancipation and stimulating their agency. Artistic expression can also help improve resilience and the wellbeing of the affected population. It increases the visibility of challenges the community faces in their everyday lives and helps them articulate aspirations for a brighter future. The following striking quote from a young Rohingya woman, working as a 'model mother' (community volunteer) at an information and feedback centre³ in Cox's Bazar, expresses the joy and stimulation brought by a community arts initiative: "*[This workshop] is like light where all dark will remove. We were not allowed to even touch paint in Myanmar, but today, I am painting along with my kids. With freedom and a wish. It makes me happy.*"⁴

Community arts

Community arts is an artistic practice that aims to engage community members in a process of art making in their own environment. The initiative is guided by professional artists collaborating with community members to help them express their ideas, stories and perspectives in their own way. For community arts, the active participation of community members in the co-creation process is as essential as the end result.

Community arts is also an effective method to raise the awareness of refugee children and families about life-saving messages and critical services available in their immediate environment. It can be transformative and therapeutic. Through participatory methods, co-creation and collaboration, community arts can help bring dignity and hope to the Rohingya people.

Another function that art can perform in refugee contexts is to relieve boredom and frustration, which is seen as one of the key factors that can lead to risk-taking behaviours among young refugees. The vulnerability to substance abuse or violent behaviours is increased when young people are distressed and unable to pursue their education and professional goals.⁵

Rohingya children paint a mural as part of a public art exchange organized by Artolution in participation with UNICEF at a UNICEF-supported child friendly space (CFS) in Balukhali camp for Rohingya refugees, Cox's Bazar district, Bangladesh



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The context in Cox's Bazar

Since the early 1990s, the Rohingya population, a Muslim minority in Myanmar, have fled extreme violence, rape, persecution and other atrocities in their native Myanmar. The most recent refugee crisis began in August 2017, when ethnic cleansing targeted Rohingya villages in Myanmar's Rakhine State. Since then, more than 740,000 Rohingya refugees,⁶ the majority of them children, women and the elderly, have crossed the border to Bangladesh and taken refuge in the Cox's Bazar district.

From the onset of the emergency, humanitarian actors have encountered serious challenges in providing basic assistance in the camps. The Rohingya refugees are faced with a situation of hardship, deprivation, vulnerability and extreme poverty. Many suffer from trauma and distress caused by the violence they have experienced. Children are especially vulnerable to the impacts of violence, discrimination and displacement. The Rohingya community has struggled throughout the crisis to protect their sense of identity and to uphold their dignity. In the camp environment, refugee families are confronted with the immediate challenge of survival, complicated by numerous other challenges, including marginalization, language barriers, a lack of opportunities and a convergence of other vulnerabilities. The recovery of the community will require long-term assistance in health; nutrition; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); child protection; education; and communication for development. In that context, the community arts programme was introduced to facilitate discussions and workshops with local children and communities on these issues, with the goal of collaboratively designing and creating a series



of public murals. The programme was designed to engage the community and raise awareness on key behavioural messages.



UNICEF's community art project helps strengthen connections to the community

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Harnessing the power of community arts in Rohingya camps

In December 2018, UNICEF partnered with Artolution, an international public arts organization, to deliver life-saving and behaviour changing information to affected communities and to increase awareness of services in the areas of health, nutrition, WASH, child protection and gender-based violence through community arts initiatives. Thousands of children and adolescent girls and boys and their families, from both refugee and host communities, participated in a number of co-creative artistic events and workshops and collectively designed colourful murals in public places. Special attention was given to promoting social cohesion between new and previous arrivals and the Bangladeshi host community.

In partnership with BITA⁷ and BRAC,⁸ and other local organizations, UNICEF and Artolution teams organized 18 workshops across the camps and host communities in Cox's Bazar in March and April 2019, with the participation of an estimated 2,800 affected community members (out of which 1,200 are girls). Women made up 56 per cent of the more than 2,000 participants over the age of 18.

The following examples demonstrate the range of co-creative, artistic initiatives resulting from these workshops.

Location: Information and feedback centre, Balukhali and Kutupalong camps

In UNICEF-established information and feedback centres located in Balukhali and Kutupalong (camps 11 and 12), refugee participants co-



created a mural that expresses their views on the significance of education, health, nutrition and family wellbeing in their lives. The mural depicts teachers and students enjoying a vibrant, colourful school environment; a peaceful family moment showing a mother, father and children as they share healthy food and safe water; medical staff providing care for a person in need; and information on the preparation of oral rehydration solutions given to those suffering from diarrhoea.

The community art project in Rohingya camps focused on Health, Nutrition, Child Protection, WASH, Education issues.



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Location: Information and feedback centre, Balukhali camp 8

This vibrant mural brings together a number of key messages, including the Rohingya community's urgent need and strong aspiration for education, surrounded by colourful expressions of hope and future dreams.





Information and Feedback Center (IFC)

তথ্য ও মতামত কেন্দ্র

চৌধুরী পাড়া
উখিয়া, কক্সবাজার।

শুধুমাত্র বাংলাদেশীদের জন্য

Canada

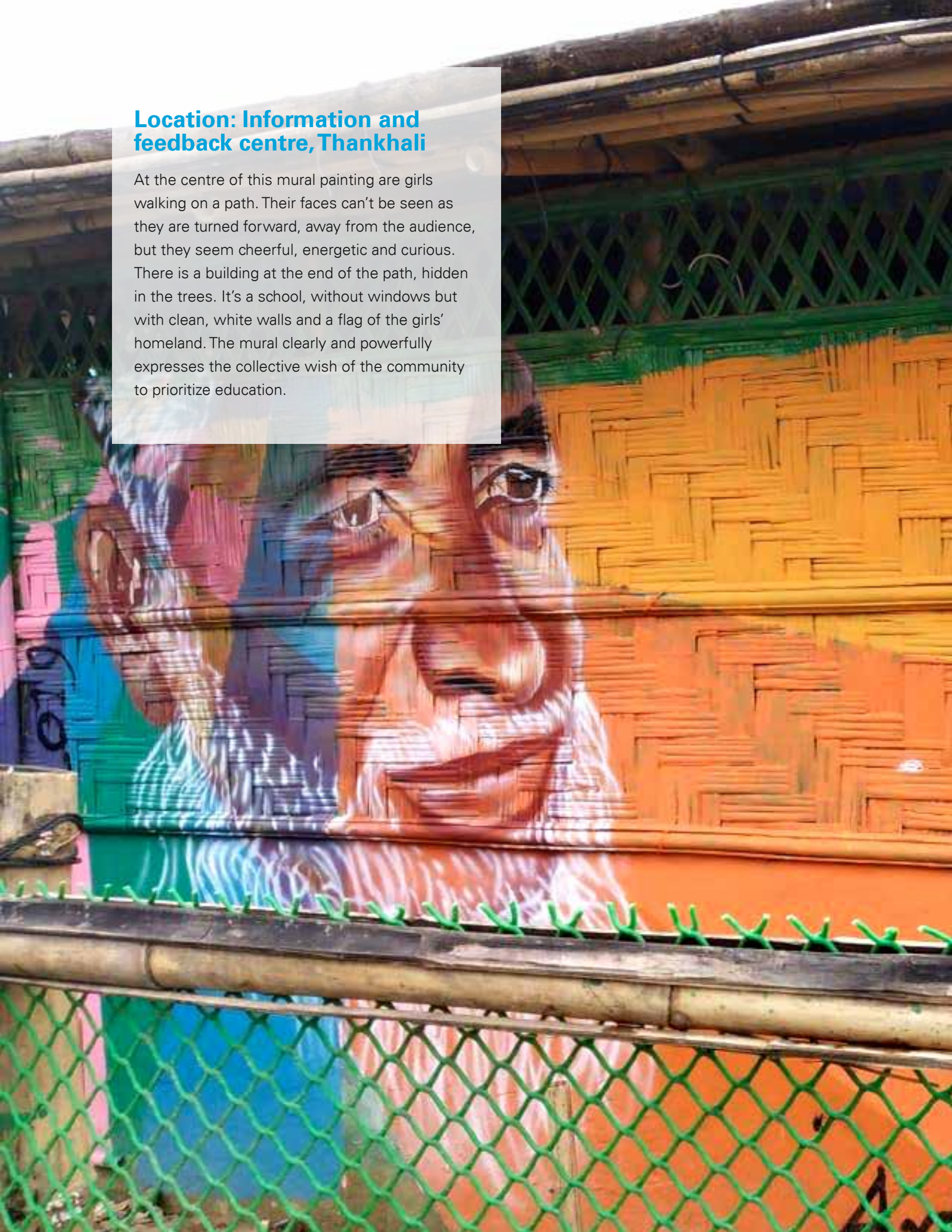


Art project helped strengthen community mobilization activities in Rohingya and host communities.

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Location: Information and feedback centre, Thankhali

At the centre of this mural painting are girls walking on a path. Their faces can't be seen as they are turned forward, away from the audience, but they seem cheerful, energetic and curious. There is a building at the end of the path, hidden in the trees. It's a school, without windows but with clean, white walls and a flag of the girls' homeland. The mural clearly and powerfully expresses the collective wish of the community to prioritize education.





UNICEF art project in public spaces plays a distinguishing role in Rohingya setting and culture.

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Location: Information and feedback centre, camp 22 (Unchiprang) and Radio NAF centre, Kutupalong

The artwork in this mural shows the aspirations of Rohingya refugees who participated in an art workshop organized with 'model mothers' and youth volunteers in two locations in Cox's Bazar. Following an open dialogue between volunteers and the Artolution professionals who co-facilitated the workshop, volunteers were able to express the results of the collaborative effort – "If anyone is sick or needs medical support in your community, take them to a doctor!"

Eye-shaped, large and mesmerizing circles of all colours give this mural an impressive magic. These colourful forms can be interpreted as visual translations of healing power, overseeing the makeshift shelters from the top of a hill and taking care of the nearby community.



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I am so happy to be a part of the UNICEF art project, I used all my favourite colours while painting



The UNICEF art project reflected cultural values and beliefs. It also helped create self-awareness so the community could record their emotions.



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UNICEF art project created opportunity to open dialogue and meaningful participation in key lifesaving messages issues impacting their lives in Bangladeshi community.

Community arts initiative in host-communities

Despite considerable differences in conditions and constraints between the Rohingya refugee camps and host communities, the impact of the influx of refugees has created a long list of challenges and needs that are now common in both camps and host communities. The murals described below represent some of these challenges.

Locations: Unchiprang and BRAC centres in Balukhali

Sending children, particularly girls, to school is one common challenge that both communities face. The murals created by host community participants show a world where girls study alongside boys, with well-educated, experienced and knowledgeable parents and elderly family members supporting their children to attend a multicultural, international school. During the workshops, participants discussed existing challenges within their communities and proposed solutions. Insufficient awareness about nutrition centres and a growing need for educational opportunities for children and their families are among the issues illustrated in one of the murals.

The second painting on canvas is a powerful summary of the urgent needs in both host and refugee communities, with a blue river running between the two communities, separating and joining them. The buildings, roads and schools on the left are relatively more attractive; the environment is greener and the children are together in playgrounds, dressed in colourful clothes. The situation on the right is starker; the environment looks precarious and people are struggling for water and other basic needs. The two red flags in the middle warn that a cyclone is approaching.





Participating in art project, Rohingya and host communities consider as important because it makes feel beauty of freedom.

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Lessons learned and way forward

- In a humanitarian context, arts-based initiatives provide environments where participants from different age, gender and religious groups can come together and connect socially in their everyday settings. This allows them to express their hopes and concerns through valued art forms, regardless of their skills.
- The participatory and expressive nature of community arts help traumatized individuals to strengthen their collective identity through creative processes and shared experiences. Collective arts-based initiatives can be used to promote healing, strengthen self-esteem, foster pride and facilitate social cohesion and resilience building.
- The impact of arts is complex, cumulative and often not immediate. Therefore, developing indicators and robust assessments to measure the impact of arts-based initiatives on the wellbeing of participants is a difficult task.
- Community-based artistic works require care and maintenance. Inviting the community members to actively join the collective creative processes from the beginning and explaining the importance of continued care and protection of art works help foster a strong sense of ownership and commitment.

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 Established at 18 locations in refugee camps and host communities, information and feedback centres ensure two-way information flow through face-to-face interactions with the community members. The centres provide life-saving information and on-site referral on urgent issues, including nutrition; WASH; medical help; hygiene behaviours; vaccination campaigns; child and newborn care. They collect information and feedback and respond to complaints.
- ⁴ Mikulyuk-Belitsky, Josey, and A.S.M Suza Uddin, ‘Artolution and UNICEF Bangladesh: Collaborative arts initiative in CXB – Final report’, Artolution, 31 July 2019.
- ⁵ Tearfund, ‘For Rohingya Children, School’s Out Permanently – Not Just for Summer’, Reliefweb, 12 August 2019, <<https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/rohingya-children-school-s-out-permanently-not-just-summer>>, accessed 12 September 2019.
- ⁶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, ‘Refugee Response in Bangladesh’ [website], 30 September 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/myanmar_refugees>, accessed 28 January 2020.
- ⁷ Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts (BITA) is a non-government organization, working in the field of human rights, social inclusion, cultural heritage awareness and poverty alleviation since 1994. For more details see <<https://bitactg.org/history/>>.
- ⁸ 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 info see <www.bracinternational.nl>.



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