Information Ecosystems
Among Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

January 2020

CASS

2

This paper is the first of a multi-part series examining the shifting sociocultural landscapes of minority and conflict-affected populations across Rakhine. The series uses three aspects of information ecosystems mapping – the role of influence, social trust, and information use – to explore the ways in which changes have contributed to community attitudes and impact the efficacy and sustainability of humanitarian interventions. Given the mass displacement of Rohingya to Bangladesh,[1*] the following paper begins with an examination of the context in Cox's Bazar, particularly the potential intersection of transformations in key sociocultural dynamics and humanitarian aid provision as would be required in the event of repatriation to Myanmar.

CASS

CASS is a research and analytical unit that provides contextual and operational analysis in support of humanitarian interventions.

1* Though there are small numbers of non-Muslim Rohingya, this paper looks primarily at majority dynamics and as such deals explicitly with Islamic identity, faith, and practice.

Executive Summary

> **The large scale displacement of Rohingya – from Rakhine State, Myanmar, to a series of refugee camps located in the Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh – catalyzed dramatic social and cultural transformations, most of which are ongoing. Ideas about leadership, modes of building influence and exerting control, and even social roles are evolving at a rapid pace. As a result, it is difficult to understand any single facet of the Rohingya-lived experience in silo; for instance, seemingly small shifts in ideas about representative leadership can have a profound impact on gender norms and domestic arrangements. Humanitarian response actors engaging with the Rohingya – in Bangladesh, Myanmar, or elsewhere – should consider community dynamics within the broader context of historical and sociocultural change.[1**]**

In this multipart series, the Community Analysis Support System (CASS) Myanmar explores the factors shaping information flows and the impact these systems have on important governance and conflict issues.

Each paper supports response actors in navigating these information ecosystems more strategically so as to improve programme responsiveness, efficacy, and sustainability. The papers are inevitably elliptical, but should serve as an initial guide for identifying possible blindspots and their impact on programming.

Key Takeaways & Considerations for Response Actors

On the whole, though large scale repatriation is still unlikely (see previous CASS paper **Realising Returns**) the sociocultural shifts that have taken place in the camps, combined with the small scale voluntary returns to Rakhine state that have already occurred, are significant enough as to have implications for humanitarian response actors working there. Given current dynamics, donors should assess funding mechanisms and consider whether their current modalities adequately support the need for cross-border inter-agency collaboration.

At a more granular level:

The breakdown and reconstitution of traditional Rohingya social structures, in particular, the samaj ('community' / 'society', generally overseen by a committee or council), has numerous implications for Rohingya returnees. For instance:

- Within Bangladesh, new arrivals were not settled in the camps alongside other refugees from their home villages. As a result, the *samaj* that have been newly formed or reconstituted in the camps

---

now contain members from different parts of Rakhine. **'Return to place of origin' is thus complicated by the fact that camp community structures are unlikely to be comprised of refugees from contiguous or even nearby villages.** Response actors should consider the ways in which intra-*samaj* hierarchies may privilege certain voices while silencing others.

- Rohingya marriages back in Myanmar generally involved people from nearby villages. Marriages that have taken place in the camps frequently involve families from entirely different townships. Decisions about relocation or return are likely to be determined primarily by the most influential members of newly formed *samaj* – generally men. As such, these decisions may further separate certain members from their extended families, who may have ended up in different camps. Response actors should thus **consider the ways in which repatriation may serve to isolate women and disrupt family dynamics,** particularly domestic care arrangements dependent on the proximity of extended family members.

Humanitarian response actors should prepare for the likelihood that existing samaj structures, which have been newly constituted in the camps, may strain or disband entirely under the pressure of repatriation.

- Given the important role *samaj* leadership plays in providing for a community's most vulnerable, in disrupting the *samaj* structure the repatriation process could leave newly-returned Rohingya communities with even fewer safety nets. Humanitarian actors should **proactively survey Rohingya communities to identify the 'basic services' currently provided by *samaj* leadership** so as to anticipate possible needs that may arise with repatriation.

- The dispute resolution role played by *samaj* committees in Rakhine pre-1992 has been undermined by decades of Myanmar, and more recently Bangladesh, government interference. Upon return, **Rohingya communities will lack local mechanisms for dealing with resource and interpersonal conflict**s – a dynamic which

may be exacerbated by aid provision and which response actors should be careful to monitor.

Within Myanmar, influence has often been predicated upon an individual's ability to communicate with Rakhine neighbours or Bamar government figures. In the camps, those with Rakhine/Bamar fluency are likely to be older and generally male.

- Response actors should prepare to **hire Rohingya-speaking staff, particularly women and young people**, to counter the risk of gender and age-based social exclusion.

- Non-Rakhine/Burmese speakers will likely have limited opportunities for engagement in the public sector, regardless of prior camp experience. This **loss of influence could create friction between community members** and should be carefully considered in hiring volunteers and forming community consultation committees.

- Response actors should recognise that a **lack of intercommunal communication may be a deliberate strategy** for building influence and not necessarily a factor of limited opportunity.

Educated youth have enjoyed greater social influence within the camps than they might have had they remained in Rakhine. Similarly, women have been able to engage in leadership, volunteer, social, and educational activities that would have otherwise been unavailable to them on account of their gender. Repatriation may leave many young people and women feeling frustrated by the lack of freedom and social recognition.

- If repatriated, **educated youth will be highly incentivised to travel onward from Rakhine to other parts of Myanmar or to third-party countries** in search of opportunities. The resulting 'brain drain' could hamper community development for years to come. Humanitarian actors should be mindful of contributing to this dynamic.

- Response actors should be careful to consider the ways in which **interventions with gender empowerment objectives could unintentionally put women at risk if they do not also work with men.**

Rohingya in the camps have been able to pursue religious formation more freely than they could in Rakhine State. Given the continued limitations placed on religious freedoms for non-Buddhists within Rakhine State, it is highly likely that conflicts over interpretation and practice may emerge should refugees be repatriated.

- Humanitarian actors should not assume that all Rohingya Muslims share the same religious beliefs. **Actors should be cognizant of tensions between religious leaders and their followers,** particularly when engaging with religious figures as community mobilisers or influencers.

Mixed experiences with direct democracy may lead Rohingya to develop novel ideas about governance that conflict with Myanmar government and/or response agency agendas.

- Given years of instability, **Rohingya communities may prioritise efficacy over direct election of leaders.** This creates a strong incentive for strongmen to establish themselves as de facto community leaders. Humanitarian response actors should consider this dynamic when conducting stakeholder mapping.

- Women's participation in sub-block governance appears to have had an impact, at least to some extent, on attitudes toward female leadership. Unless similar opportunities can be guaranteed within Rakhine, **response actors should be cognizant of the gender dynamics surrounding willingness to repatriate.**

Crime networks already thrive cross-border; repatriation may only exacerbate certain dynamics:

- Sex trafficking of Rohingya girls/women;
- Human trafficking or smuggling;
- The narcotics trade.

Response actors should consider how repatriation could further entangle certain community members in these networks and **develop cross-border coordination mechanisms for monitoring and mitigating the associated risks.**

Introduction

The ongoing crisis in Rakhine State is in no small way defined by a lack of clear, timely, and trustworthy information. The Myanmar government-mandated internet black out, in place since June 2019, still affects four townships of northern and central Rakhine State: the government of Bangladesh's decision to severely curtail internet access inside the refugee camps has further undermined information access in these areas. As a result, lack of access to independent media sources and limited digital connectivity are troubling yet relatively stable aspects of the information ecosystem in these areas. Sociocultural factors, however, are by their nature in near constant flux and particularly changeable in the aftermath of conflict and/or crisis. When mobile communications are disrupted, and levels of literacy and trust in traditional media are low – as they are throughout Rakhine State and within the Cox's Bazaar refugee camps[1]*** – understanding the nuanced interplay of cultural norms, religious cosmologies, and structures of power is critical.

Information ecosystem mapping can support response actors in making sense of the way by which information circulates within a defined community. It is a particularly effective means of understanding how circumstantial changes, such as displacement, affect not only the flow of information, but also its perceived trustworthiness and eventual impact. Moreover, information ecosystem mapping can help to uncover the means through which influence is constituted and asserted, norms and power structures reinscribed, and also transformed.

Defining the System
"Information ecosystems are complex adaptive systems that include information infrastructure, tools, media, producers, consumers, curators, and sharers. They are complex organizations of dynamic social relationships through which information moves and transforms in flows. Through information ecosystems, information appears as a master resource, like energy, the lack of which makes everything more difficult."[2]

Information ecosystem mapping takes a Systems Theory approach to understanding the flow of infor-

1*** Internews, 'Information Needs Assessment: Cox's Bazar - Bangladesh', 2017

2 Internews, 'Why Information matters: A foundation for resilience', 2015.

mation through lived environments. Accordingly, both human and non-human factors are studied in order to map the interrelated and interdependent dynamics which influence perceptions and practices. Information ecosystem mapping thus accounts for social relationships, cultural context, religious belief and practice, as well as the dynamic networks of control and influence constituted and contested by communities and their members. Information ecosystems thereby function as the scaffolding upon which individuals construct an understanding of the world around them and the conditions of possibility enabling or constraining their agency and action.

Information ecosystem mapping works at three levels:

1. Macro-level analysis (i.e. media landscape and political/regulatory environments);
2. Granular observations (i.e. information availability, needs, and distribution), and;
3. Human and social insights (i.e. identifying information disseminators and influencers).[3]

Response actors will be familiar with the ways in which mapping information needs, production, circulation, and access improves communications with beneficiary communities. What has been less well appreciated to date is the opportunity mapping exercises provide for programme forecasting. Indeed, information ecosystems mapping – particularly the role of influence, social trust, and the use of information – offers an especially helpful interpretive framework through which questions about the future can be examined in the present. Of particular relevance to response actors working in Rakhine State, information ecosystems mapping can aid in anticipating likely migration flows, responses to and emerging forms of governance, and the factors most likely to drive or mitigate conflict and crime.

1) Examining Influence

New forms of influence can and often do emerge out of uncertainty, trauma, and displacement, meaning that influence cannot be understood as a fixed or immutable characteristic. In highly controlled contexts, access to information can form a critical component in the constitution of influence. Simultaneously, information 'gatekeepers' play an outsized role in selecting what and with whom to share, as well as in framing information so that it is interpreted in particular ways. As such, it is important to understand the composition of influence, for instance, which social or economic factors can be leveraged to build it. In doing so, it is easier to anticipate how influential actors will frame certain issues and what that means for the way communities make sense of new information and changes in their circumstances.

In some instances, influence is predicated upon an individual's ability to communicate across social groups; however in others, refusal to engage out-groups, their leaders, and members, can also serve to strengthen belief in a figure's moral or ideological steadfastness. In divided or deeply hierarchical contexts, the latter quality often helps to strengthen an individual's influence. As such, mapping information ecosystems can highlight resiliencies (linkages between groups) as well as potential fractures.

Constituting Influence in Cox's Bazar
Muslim Rohingya society has traditionally revolved around the village or neighborhood mosque and the *samaj* (committee) that governed it.[4] Though most *samaj* activities were centered around the physical mosque, the *samaj* itself was a social – not a physical – structure. The *samaj* primarily functioned to maintain Islamic religious norms and certain ethno-cultural customs, but also served as a safety network for the community. Therefore, these groups of (in almost all cases) men exerted significant influence over other individuals within the community.

These traditional social structures have gone through

3 Ibid.

4 *Samaj,* or **shomaj** (depending on the Rohingya dialect) can be glossed as a 'community', 'society', or 'committee/council', depending on the context in which the word is used.

drastic changes in recent decades. The *samaj's* powers in Myanmar were significantly curtailed by the *Na Sa Ka*, an inter-agency force established to police Rakhine State's northernmost townships in 1992.[5] Where the *samaj* had been the main dispute resolution authority, under the oppressive eye of the *Na Sa Ka* this power shifted to Myanmar government-appointed officials at the village and village tract level.

With the mass displacement of Rohingya to Bangladesh in 2017, the *samaj* lost even more authority. The clan-based *samaj* structure effectively crumbled as families separated into different camps.[6] The power vacuum was quickly filled by Bangladesh military-appointed majhis, who in return created groups to administer blocks and sub-blocks. The block system – with the majhi as Rohingya representative, and with the Bangladesh government's 'Camp in Charge' officer as final arbitrator – is the new paradigm of power and influence in the camps and therefore in much of Rohingya society.

However, new mosque-centered *samaj* emerged organically in the camps and proliferated, partially in response to the humanitarian response community's and Bangladesh government's initial negligence of the community's spiritual and social needs. The current mosque-based *samaj*, often called 'mosque committees', have very limited influence compared to the pre-*Na Sa Ka* samaj back in Myanmar: they do not have the same policing power, nor do they have any authority in dispute arbitrations. They do, however, still retain clout in terms of Islamic rites, especially those related to funerals and marriages.[7]

Power & Hierarchy Within the *Samaj*

Not every individual within a *samaj* (committee) is influential; some may have certain skills such as arbitration, or religious recitation, that prove useful for the samaj as a unit but that does not translate into influence directly. Rather, some members of the *samaj* were 'elders' (*murobbi* in Rohingya, literally meaning 'guardians' in Arabic) of the community. Becoming a *murobbi* was largely dependent on an individual's gender, level of piety, their family's social capital, and their financial input into the *samaj* and its institutions.

Access to influence within the *samaj* was also not evenly distributed; previously in Myanmar, economic privileges (relatively to other community members) often translated into greater influence within the *samaj*. For example, individuals with the financial means to construct a new mosque or repair an existing one would almost always have more influence in the *samaj*. Similarly, men that were able to host large communal feasts were deemed influential in the community. Today, this same principle remains true in the camps – Rohingya with access to capital, jobs, and/or trade networks often assume positions of authority. Though they may no longer host large commensality events, many still contribute to the upkeep of the camp's mosque.

An individual's influence both in and out of a *samaj* committee was also dependent on the *gushti* to which he/she belonged. Meaning clan or lineage, *gushti* influence and authority can stem from a variety of factors to include the local socio-political significance of an ancestral member; the number of male heirs within a specific *gushti*; or the capacity of a *gushti* to distribute patronage within the larger community. Whatever the source of *gushti* authority, Rohingya families in Myanmar maintained their social position through involvement in commerce, government, and religious activities. Within

---

5 According to ICG, the *Na Sa Ka* or 'Border Immigration Headquarters' was, "comprised of around 1200 immigration, police, intelligence and customs officials. It operate[d] in the Muslim-majority northern part of the state, near the Bangladesh border" (International Crisis Group, 'Myanmar's "Nasaka": Disbanding an Abusive Agency', 2013.

6 Recent studies of Rohingya migration patterns have established that village and extended family structures were not reconstituted within the camps as had often been assumed. See: IOM, 'CLAN, COMMUNITY, NATION: Belonging among Rohingya living in makeshift camps', 2020.

7 Though the samaj can engage in match-making, their authority is truly flexed when they 'officiate' a marriage according to Islamic traditions. Many Rohingya do not see civil marriages as 'true' marriages, as religious marriage has more legitimacy. As such, the *samaj* is usually involved in negotiating the dowry between the bridge and groom's families as well as dispute resolutions that may arise during the marriage ceremonies. As polygamy is common in the Rohingya community, the *samaj* might also be involved in arbitration with previous wives.

the camps in Cox's Bazar, *gushti* influence largely dissipated as *majhi*-headed block administration no longer requires the social scaffolding that *gushti* and *samaj* once provided. However, *gushti* influence is still exerted on more personal levels; marriages are still arranged according to *gushti* hierarchy, and employment opportunities are still kept within *gushti* networks.

Though education was a source of influence for Rohingya communities in Myanmar, it took on a different and much greater role in the Cox's Bazar camps. For the Rohingya, education primarily came in two forms: Islamic religious education, and Myanmar (or Bangla) State curriculum. The two were not mutually exclusive, though it was difficult to pursue both tracks simultaneously. Historically, religious education had higher social prestige within Muslim Rohingya society. However, in the current situation, it offers few instrumental advantages beyond the mosque. Those that had Myanmar State education (or Bangla State education if they were registered Rohingya[8]) have greater influence in the community now because they can communicate and work within an international system that includes international humanitarian organizations and UN agencies, and act as liaisons between government officials, the international aid industry, and local community members. Thus, those with State education currently have greater access to information, resources, and employment – particularly with international agencies and NGOs.

Gender is an almost definitionally important aspect of influence within the *samaj*. Within family units, male heads of households (husbands or fathers) were expected to manage and police their female kin and ensure the youth's adherence to social norms. Outside of households, male clansmen (members of the same *gushti*) also policed their female kin, as any disrepute would affect the honor of the entire clan. In the camps, traditional gender roles have been challenged, largely as the product of Rohingya interaction with western humanitarian and human rights organizations, as well as host community norms. Indeed, there is a direct and concerted effort by various Gender Based Violence and education-related programmes to address the inequalities women and girls routinely faced within Rohingya communities in Myanmar. Reportedly, these programmes, and

their intended outcomes, have uneven levels of acceptance with certain cohorts of the Rohingya population, though generally the community holds a positive view of them. The Rohingya community is also influenced by host community norms with respect to gender. While the Chittagonian host community is also considered religiously conservative by Bangladeshis from other districts, female education is nonetheless prevalent, and many Chittagonian Bangladeshi women work in Rohingya camps as interpreters, community health workers, and other influential positions.

Exerting Influence (and its Limits)
Traditionally, Myanmar-based Rohingya community members with social and financial capital had considerable capacity to exert influence on other community members – whether acting as part of a formal *samaj* committee or merely as individuals. For example, *samaj* committee members were able to excommunicate members of the community and their families if social norms were broken; relatedly, they also had the authority to admit (or re-admit) members. For a culture that is heavily reliant on community and communal relations, excommunication was significant and carried enormous consequences; for example, excommunicated families could not attend weddings of close kin or bury their dead in the *samaj* graveyard. At the same time, *samaj* committees arbitrated disagreements, and supervised the maintenance of community norms and rituals (primarily funerals and marriage rites), while also supporting underprivileged members of the community and hosting large communal feasts and ceremonies.

Samaj leaders no longer exert the same degree of influence in the camps in Bangladesh, and authority has decentralized to individual households and their respective heads. Rohingya traditionally lived in large, extended families where several males shared different levels and types of authority. In Bangladesh, Rohingya men that otherwise had very little social capital in Myanmar now suddenly have decision-making authority. This 'democratization' of social authority has also had some negative effects; as the *samaj* lost power, the arbitration of divorces, plural marriages, family resource disputes, and other interpersonal conflicts have become increasingly difficult to manage. Equally, the emphasis on quasi-nuclear family structures, for instance in the context of aid distributions, reportedly remains a novel concept.

Influencing Key Demographics
Muslim Rohingya society is patriarchal and patrilineal;

---

[8] Registered Rohingya are those who arrived in Bangladesh during earlier periods of migration and displacement.

both social and financial capital normally rests in the hands of men. Women's influence is usually limited to the domestic sphere, and even there, most decisions are made by men. For example, the number of children a woman has and even what she wears comes under the purview of male authority and influence. Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships offer a rare opportunity for women to exert influence; women who have more cordial relations with their in-laws are often able to exert more influence in domestic matters.

Community youth traditionally followed a structured path to becoming active *samaj* members, which brought them gradual influence within their respective communities. Today in Bangladesh, male youth attend prayer at local mosques, and village or community gatherings, and in these environments are expected to follow established community leadership unquestionably. Financial prowess can sometimes trump social standing, especially if an individual is from a well-to-do family. At the same time, young women have very limited scope or opportunity to contribute to the *samaj*, and thus they have the least degree of influence. Women are expected to maintain family honor upon reaching puberty, especially as both perceptions of piety and chastity are linked to marriageability. Marriage represents a pivotal coming of age ritual in the life of a Rohingya woman, although this moment can be also viewed to mark a woman's transition from one male guardian to another (father to husband).

The Role of Religion

Rohingya Muslims are an eastern Indic Muslim group and as such they share many historical and social parallels with neighboring communities: Chittagonian Muslims, Bengali Muslims, and to a far lesser degree, Kaman Muslims.

The Rohingya have an origin story that claims Arab sailors were shipwrecked along the Rakhine coast centuries ago, and that they intermarried and converted the local coastal community to Islam. Like many other coastal Muslim communities in South Asia, the Rohingya may also have been influenced by Arab traders and Muslim missionaries. Though it is possible that some Rohingya have Arab origins or that the community has been influenced by Arab culture, the history of the Rohingya community's adaptation of Islam is far more nuanced. After the conquest of Bengal and the eastern Indian Subcontinent by Turko-Afghan conquerors starting in the 1500s, the populace (which at that point followed varied or syncretic faiths, including Buddhism,

Hinduism, and animism) steadily and increasing converted to Islam. A similar pattern affected communities settled along the entire Chittagong-Arakan coast.[9]

Concurrently, if not before the arrival of the Turko-Afghan conquerors and subsequent administrators in the 1500s, Sufi missionary activity in the Bengal and Chittagong region spread Islamic mysticism and its accompanying practices into Rakhine. Though most Rohingya now eschew Sufi rituals and traditions (such as worship at shrines, etc.), there are still elements of Sufi cosmology in the average Rohingya understanding of Islam, such as zikir (repetition of prayers) and *ziyarat* (visiting graves). There are also syncretic elements in the Rohingya practice of Islam; both Buddhist and Hindu beliefs are in some ways embedded in Rohingya Islamic ritualization. Nevertheless, since the 1990s Rohingya community members across the state have reported that Sufi practices in Rakhine are increasingly suppressed by religious leaders, particularly those who hold more austere interpretations of their faith.

Formal and Informal Modes of Learning

Prior to their fleeing Myanmar, most Rohingya Muslim children were expected to attend *moktob*, an elementary level of Islamic education. These *moktobs* could be part of a community mosque, or they could be housed in an educated community member's home. In *moktobs*, children learned to read Quranic Arabic, with particular emphasis on the memorisation of Quranic recitations required for daily prayers, though seldom did children learn how to write or speak Arabic. The first recitation of the entire Quran was marked ceremoniously, and was seen as an important milestone for both boys and girls. Girls were often unable to complete moktob studies taking place in mosques on account of menstruation taboos associated with mosque entry. Most girls finished their moktob studies at the home of an educated female relative.

After primary *moktob* education, some men (rarely women) went to *madrassah*, the secondary level of Islamic education.[10] Students often lived on site and education levels differ by madrassah – with some providing middle or

---

9 d'Hubert, Thibaut (2018). In the Shade of the Golden Palace: Alaol and Middle Bengali Poetics in Arakan. Oxford Scholarship Online. Retrieved from https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780190860332.001.0001/oso-9780190860332

10 *Madrassahs* are most often found in urban areas, though it was not unusual to see them in rural settings as well.

high school levels of education and others university level accreditation (according to their respective system). The more well-known *madrassahs* in Rakhine are Mee Kyaung Zay *Madrassah* in Buthidaung, Nurullah *Madrassah* in Maungdaw, and *Madrassah* Jamia Arakan in Kyawktaw. The curriculum covered by *madrassahs* depended primarily on whether or not the institution was private or public (*qawmi*). However, most offered Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, Bangla or Burmese language instruction, as was relevant to the location. *Madrassahs* also taught Quranic/Islamic jurisprudence and mathematics, at a minimum.

Graduates of madrassahs found employment as mosque imams in villages and towns throughout the region. There, they often received high levels of respect from the community and participated as members of the village *samaj*. Yet after their arrival in Bangladesh, many of these educational patterns changed. Many children still go to *moktobs,* which have been established by camp mosque committees and supported by Islamic NGOs. There they receive primary Arabic and Islamic instruction; however, there is very little incentive for older boys to continue on to madrassah, as being a religious scholar or imam no longer carries the same social standing or social prestige.

Islamic Schools of Jurisprudence

Like a majority of other South Asian Muslims, the Rohingya are predominantly Sunni Muslims who follow the Hanafi *mazhab* (from Arabic *madhhab*, used to mean Islamic school of jurisprudence). The Hanafi school is thought to be the more moderate of the four Sunni schools, allowing a greater degree of free-will than other interpretations. However, many Rohingya Muslims do not have a clear understanding of Islamic jurisprudence, to include categories such as Sunni Islam, let alone Hanafi. Indeed, many Rohingya understand Islam in a ritualized context, as dictated by their community's Imam and other learned men, with more personal, 'spiritual' interpretations of faith often highly syncretic. Yet faith, much like social structures and influence, is also changing within the camps. With the Rohingya community's exposure to international and national organizations, and accompanying perspectives on the role and 'correct' manifestation of faith, it would not be surprising to see different interpretations of Islam emerge within the camps and accompaying influence on Rohingya self-identity. There has long been rumors that certain mosques are more aligned with extremely conservative views of Islam, funded by both international and national donors.

Notable Missionary Movements

The missionary movements that most influenced the

Rohingya Muslim community often originated from other parts of South Asia, particularly from Bengal or Chittagong. As a result, these neighboring regional Muslim communities share numerous similarites with respect to religious practices, especially as there were seldom any home-grown (within Rakhine) or Yangon-based Islamic missionary movements.

The Deobandi movement is one of the most influential and long-lasting missionary (rather, evangelical) movements in recent history. An Islamic religio-political movement that originated in North India after the fall of the Mughal Empire, Deobandism was a response to the increasing anti-Muslim policies of British colonialism in South Asia. It gained prominence throughout the subcontinent and adjoining regions in the early 1900s, and was especially important throughout the anti-colonial period as a part of Islamic reawakening or revival across South Asia. The Deobandi movement helped establish large *madrassahs* throughout South Asia, particularly in the Chittagong region of present-day Bangladesh. Due to its contiguous geography and similar culture, Rohingyas in Rakhine were also influenced by the presence of these Deobandi madrassahs.[11]

Tablighi Jamat is an Islamic revivalist movement that originated in the same philosophical space as Deobandism; however, since its establishment, the Tabligh movement emphasized its apolitical nature.[12] In the Rohingya context, the Tabligh movement flourished, perhaps as much due to its apolitical nature (vis-a-vis Deobandism's more extreme views) as its broad personalized tenets, even under Myanmar's strict military rule. In recent decades, the thriving Tablighi Jamat community in Yangon has organised numerous missionary trips into Rakhine State. In some instances these missions have been targeted by anti-Muslim activists,[13] and the violent killings of Tablighi missionaries in 2012 in southern Rakhine State stopped

11 Ingram, Brannon D. "Understanding the Deoband Movement." Maydan, 8 Nov. 2018, themaydan.com/2018/11/understanding-deoband-movement/

12 Howenstein, Nicholas. Islamist Networks: The Case of Tablighi Jamaat. 29 July 2013, www.usip.org/publications/2006/10/islamist-networks-case-tablighi-jamaat.

13 Farish A. Noor describes the Tablighi Jamat as a "conservative literalist-fundamentalist neo-Salafi movement with a strong purist bent". Noor, Farish A. 2003, Islam on the Move: The Tablighi Jama'at in Southeast Asia, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam. For more on Tablighi Jamat in Yangon see **https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-rise-of-the-tablighi-jamaat-movement**.

many of these visits. Yet the influence of the Tablighi Jamat movement remains significant, and can be most readily seen in Rohingya Muslims' increasing adoption of Islamic dress and social customs.

The notion, commonly promulgated by Tablighi Jamat missionaries, that one cannot be a good Muslim unless one eschews non-Islamic influences, contributed to the sense of mutual incomprehensibility common to Rohingya Muslim and Rakhine Buddhist relations prior to the most recent crisis. It stands to reason that without access to opportunities for deeper religious study and practice, increasingly austere cultural and social practices become the only means through which piety can be performed.

2) Social Trust

Where genuinely independent media is limited, social trust becomes essential to communities as they navigate conflicting, biased, or untrustworthy information. As such, mapping information flows can help to highlight the networks that cohere ideas about governance and through which information about out-migration makes its way into communities.

Intersection with Governance
According to interviews, some Rohingya men reported that within Myanmar, they intermittently participated in elections (as representatives or as voters) for their *ukatta* (chairman). The elected *ukatta* then acted as a representative and served as a liaison between the *samaj* and the Myanmar government (in effect, the *Na Sa Ka*). These same men noted that this 'democratic' process was short-lived, with *ukattas* directly appointed by the government in recent years. However, through this brief exercise in democracy, some Rohingya men that relocated to the camps in Bangladesh became familiar with democratic processes and principles.

These men are also often members of (or at least familiar with) CSOs that have rights/justice-related programs, thus further expanding their knowledge of democratic principles. Some Rohingya women, particularly the group called Shanti Mohila, also have better knowledge about democratic processes due to their exposure to the work of foreign NGOs. However, the vast majority of the

Rohingya do not understand or have favorable attitudes towards universal democracy.[14] This has much to do with the community's history and pre-existing social structures. Understanding democratic principles and processes is strongly supported by a basic education, access to which is extremely low in the Rohingya community. Women's knowledge and attitudes were even more limited; most women interviewed continued to insist that decisions, especially political ones, required male guardian or family member approval. Relatedly, there were rarely any female Rohingya *ukattas* in Myanmar. The idea of gender inclusive authority and rights thus remains a sensitive topic in the Rohingya community, especially given its perception as a breach of religious norms.

However, these dynamics are shifting quickly in the camps in Bangladesh. Upon fleeing to Bangladesh, many Rohingya were soon exposed to a new figure of authority – the *majhi*. As there were no elective processes for the *majhis*, many of whom community members perceived to be corrupt, demands grew for a more fair and equitable system of representation. Humanitarian agencies have tended to support these demands; many NGOs and CSOs taught community members about democratic principles, and how these could be implemented even within the confines of refugee camps. Some camps even experimented with the idea of electing a '*samaj*-like' committee, with both men and women representatives from the sub-blocks. However, following a rally to mark "Genocide Day" in August 2019, these efforts were stymied and any efforts at empowering the Rohingya within the camps were curtailed by the Bangladesh authorities.[15]

14 Contrary to the new wave of Rohingya refugees who arrived in Cox's Bazaar in 2017, the registered Rohingya, who arrived in earlier periods of migration and displacement, have a much better understanding of democracy. Those who arrived in the early 1990s had established elected committees prior to the crisis of 2017 and its resulting influx. These committees worked directly with humanitarian agencies and the Bangladesh government on a variety of topics. Because registered Rohigya and newer arrivals have been settled into different camps, which are administered separately, these democratic leadership structures likely do not have significant influence on new arrivals ideas about representation and governance.

15 Kamruzzaman, Md. "Bangladesh Gets 'Tougher' on Rohingya Refugees." Anadolu Ajansı, 11 Sept 2019, www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/bangladesh-gets-tougher-on-rohingya-refugees/1578938.

Overall, effective authority seems to be favored over weak democratically elected authority. As a result, leadership within the camps may not be as closely linked to social trust as it may have been back in Myanmar. Social trust was heavily reliant on *samaj* and the *gushti*, and in Bangladesh, roles of the *samaj* and *gushti* structures have largely become defunct. People show trust towards different groups or institutions depending on their needs, and consequently a high level of trust towards International humanitarian organizations. With that said, Rohingya people interviewed also expressed gratitude for and trust in the Camp Officer in Charge (CiC) – Bangladeshi government appointed officers – and their decisions. In interviews, many Rohingya reported that these officers consult with the Rohingya people before making any decisions, and that their concerns and demands are met when relayed to the CiC office. However, this attitude could be performative, particularly in an interview setting (they do not want to come across as ungrateful or complaining).

Intersection with Migration Patterns

To date, very few studies have examined the messages that are shared by Rohingya diaspora in places like Malaysia and Indonesia with those living as refugees in the camps. While some of these networks will be obvious, others are less so. For instance, there is evidence to suggest that some Rohingya who fled to India from Rakhine State between 2012 and 2014 were later compelled to travel to Cox Bazar to join family in the camps following the latest displacement.
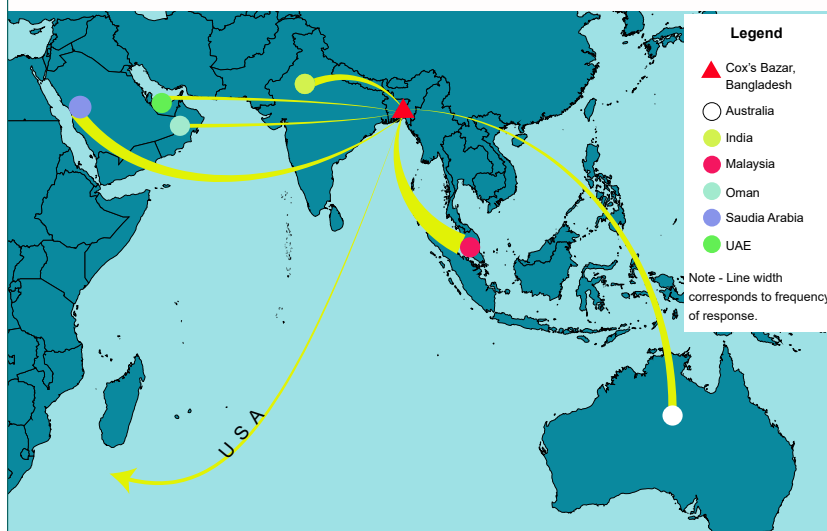
Regardless of when or through which route they came to Bangladesh, repatriation is perhaps the most sensitive topic for the Rohingya community. For the Rohingya that fled in 2017, the constant fear of possible repatriation or relocation to Bhashan Char also looms. In both cases, information seldom flows from the Bangladesh government and military down to the camps. Information is often safeguarded by respective stakeholders.

Information regarding repatriation that is available to CiC's, humanitarian agencies, and organizations is often shared with *majhis* and other select individuals. These individuals are then expected to disseminate relevant information to the remainder of the community through their social channels. Anecdotal evidence gathered during the course of interviews suggested that *majhis* were encouraging (or coaxing) block members to sign up on repatriation lists.

Rohingya views on repatriation are not likely to change until demands for citizenship and military accountability are met. As such, most people are hesitant to discuss details regarding repatriation in the current political atmosphere in the camps. Nonetheless, some women interviewed did express their views on repatriation: these women, having had access to education and experience as volunteers, view repatriation as a likely regression of the freedoms they've acquired after coming to Bangladesh. In many ways, Myanmar-based Rohingya women are doubly oppressed – both by the Myanmar government and by their own patriarchal society. In the camps, Rohingya women are more free to meet, work, and learn: activities that were essentially unheard of in villages in Myanmar. A number of Rohingya women living in the diaspora, particularly those in Malaysia and a few in Turkey, have become vocal feminist activists, and their respective views on gender issues also appear to influence women in the camps. Rohingya women from the camps who travelled to the International Criminal Court in the Hague met with other female Rohingya activists from the diaspora community; the networks they formed continue to be a pathway through which

CASS

Frequency of Contact Between Refugees and the Rohingya Diaspora

Legend

▲ Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh
○ Australia
● India
● Malaysia
● Oman
● Saudia Arabia
● UAE

Note - Line width corresponds to frequency of response.

Data source: xchange foundation Rohingya Survey 2019 (data as of March 2019).
Disclaimer: This CASS product is designed for information purposes only. This map may not show all the islands of the coastal areas due to scale limitations. CASS cannot guarantee the complete accuracy of the information presented. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official acceptance or endorsement by CASS.

information about gender and women's rights shape the perceptions of women in the camps.

Some interviewees stated that they still have relatives in Rakhine State with whom they maintain contact through social media. Through these channels, Bangladesh-based refugees receive updates on conditions in their communities of origin; however, as Rohingya movement within Rakhine State is severely restricted, Myanmar-based relatives are unable to share comprehensive information with their relatives in Bangladesh. As a result, the Rohingya in Cox's Bazar are largely dependent on traditional media, which they may not necessarily trust, as well as diaspora influencers whose own experiences of migration are in many ways distinct from those in the camps. Rohingya influencers who have immigrated to Western countries, for instance the U.K., Canada, and the United States, are sometimes seen by Rohingya within the camps as capitalising on the suffering of communities to which they no longer truly belong. As one Rohingya elder stated: "What do they know of our sufferings as they sit in their airplanes." As such, though these figures are often some of the most prominent voices on the issue of repatriation, their actual ability to influence Rohingya within the camps is limited. Less internationally visible figures, such as activists based primarily in Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey and Pakistan, are at times seen as more reliable sources of information on the prospect of repatriation and third-country resettlement.[16]

Emigration has marked social and financial components; those with financial means were able to 'smuggle' themselves out of Rakhine State prior to / during the violence that erupted in 2012. Many Rohingya paid large sums of money to move to Yangon, and from there, to other destinations. These relatively wealthy and well-educated migrants found differing levels of success in terms of acquiring legal status in their respective host countries. Those from the higher status Rohingya social clans were often able to find jobs, which in turn enabled them to receive legal recognition and status more quickly – including in some European countries. These same 'upper class' people are often asked to speak on behalf of the community, but at times do so in ways that uncritically represent their personal experiences as the norm. However, it should be noted that given these socio-economic perspec-

tives, diaspora activist interests may not necessarily align with those for whom third-country migration prospects are less attainable. For example, many well-to-do Rohingya only consider migration to Malaysia or Europe and other Western countries. Less fortunate Rohingya are willing to travel to the Middle East to seek work as laborers. For still others, the prospect of third-country migration appears entirely out of reach.

Family reunification is an increasingly important factor in migration. Rohingya that were able to migrate to a third country – whether through third-country resettlement, asylum, or illegal migration – are now attempting to bring their family members to those same countries through family reunification processes. To date, family reunification has been severely limited by the difficulty Rohingya face in obtaining either a Myanmar or Bangladesh passport. Rohingya families that migrated and have children of marriageable age are thus considered highly influential in their communities, as marriage offers a migration route for spouses to a third country (where permitted). Even if they do not migrate, spouses and extended families benefit from remittances and accompanying socio-economic community capital.

The most educated members of diaspora communities often come to the aid of the uneducated, the poor, and recent arrivals, providing everything from employment opportunities to housing to support navigating host-country legal processes. This is particularly true for countries where whole families are present, such as Malaysia. Powerful community members exert influence not just over their respective diaspora communities, but sometimes as far as the camps through existing complex *samaj* and family clan networks. For example, if an earlier Rohingya migrant to Dubai became well-established and prosperous, he would support the immigration of clan-members, particularly a close family member.

3) Information Use

The impact of information on communities is not always positive; in certain circumstances, information flows can also serve the interests of bad-faith actors. For instance, information can be managed in such a way as to draw disaffected youth into crime syndicates, or to encourage increasingly austere religious interpretations and practices. Information that is closely managed, by state or non-state actors (for

---

16 Future papers in this series will examine the information ecosystems of the Rohingya diaspora in these locations and their influence on Rohingya communities in both Cox's Bazar and Rakhine state.

instance the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army or ARSA), can serve to fray resiliencies between communities, and undermine social cohesion. Understanding the impact of information on communities can thus help response actors to more effectively counter the effects of anti-social discourses on issues such as human and drug trafficking, religious extremism, and intercommunal conflict.

Armed Group Recruitment

In interviews, participants were hesitant to speak about the relationships that entangle Rohingya communities with local armed actors, such as ARSA, and cross border armed groups. Gossip in the camps tends to suggest that ARSA's main purpose is no longer armed resistance. Rather, many suggest the group is trying to reconfigure itself as a religiously-aligned or community-based social work organisation. However, some minority religious figures living in the camps argue against this reading, suggesting instead that ARSA primarily functions as a crime syndicate (smuggling narcotics) and an unofficial policing force manufacturing consent around the terms of repatriation.

CASS
Reported Overseas Movement of Rohingya Refugees from Bangladesh (Appox. October 2018-March 2019)

Dubai (UAE): 6%

India: 22%

Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Oman: 6%

Malaysia: 66%

Data source: *Xchange Foundation Rohingya Survey 2019 (data as of March 2019).*

(Note: Of total 1,277 respondents, 17 knew someone who left Bangladesh during the last six months. percentages represent proportions of those 17 respondents.)

Disclaimer: *This CASS product is designed for information purposes only. This map may not show all the islands of the coastal areas due to scale limitations. CASS cannot guarantee the complete accuracy of the information presented. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official acceptance or endorsement by CASS*

Prior to August 2019, the civil society landscape in the camps was dotted with organizations that were on a spectrum of 'active' to 'shell' (i.e. organizations setup for funding purposes). In theory, civil society organizations would employ or attract young men (the target demographic for ethno-nationalist armed groups like ARSA). However, after the crackdown on CSOs that followed the August 2019 rally, many such shell groups disbanded. Membership and loyalty to CSOs is largely based on kinship or clan allegiances. Given the inherent social hierarchy in Rohingya society, a large percentage of Rohingya people in the lower rungs of society – those that were previously from rural, remote areas in Rakhine State – have fewer social connections, and thus less incentive to join these CSOs. Preliminary research suggests that it us these excluded or marginalised individuals who are more prone to joining organisations like ARSA.

Furthermore, Rohingya male youth, ranging from ages roughly 10 to 18 years, often lack access to educational, employment, and psycho-social support. This demographic is often deemed too old for mixed male-female spaces, such as 'Child Friendly Spaces', and too young to be employed as a volunteer in Cash for Work (C4W) programmes. This situation is further compounded by the recent internet data blackout in the camps. This lack of social and livelihood opportunities may also be a push factor for young males to join ARSA, though requires more research.
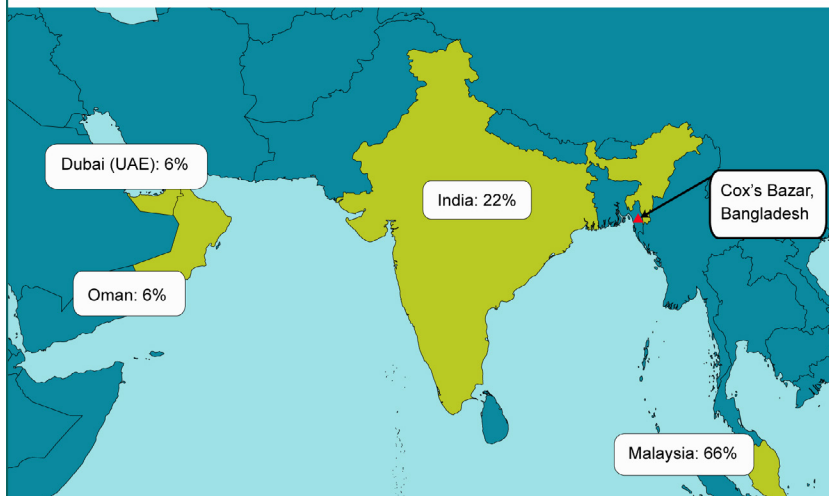
ARSA's prime pull factor is its notoriety and reputation for accepting members from all rungs of Rohingya society. It stands out as an organization that merges several facets of Rohingya identity: Islamic faith, geographic origin, and ethnolinguistic identity. In many ways, ARSA gives an otherwise disenfranchised community a sense of identity – a powerful tool in recruitment.

Crime

There is very little empirical evidence to suggest that organized crime is widespread in the Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar District, though there were/are reports of criminal activity and organizations that are known to involve Rohingya individuals (or small groups). Additionally, given the Bangladesh military's dominating presence in the region, particularly in the Rohingya refugee response, flow of information in and out of the camps can be greatly curtailed and it is therefore challenging to confirm the veracity of rumors concerning the participation of Rohingya refugees in organised crime. As such, the following three instances

of crime are largely based on conversations with other humanitarian organizations, local Bangladeshi/host community members, and a small number of new Rohingya refugees:

Sex Trafficking of Rohingya Girls/Women

Rohingya women and young girls are the most vulnerable members of the community due to various underlying social structures (some of which have been noted above) as well as current dynamics in the camps. Since the beginning of the influx in 2017, there were reports in both local Bangladeshi media and in humanitarian communiques that trafficking of Rohingya girls and women was taking place both within and outside of the camps.17 As the women/girls themselves are stripped of almost any agency, one must ask what compelled male guardians to resort to such activities. Financial factors are the most obvious, especially for families without any sons/male members that can earn supplemental income. Female-headed households could have also been coaxed into such activities as a result of sheer desperation. As for pull factors, there are a few conjectures: Cox's Bazar, the nearest sizable town, is Bangladesh's prime tourist destination. Though there are no clearly demarcated red-light districts, it's plausible that there exist criminal networks specialised in trafficking young women for sex work. A large military cantonment and trucking hub in the adjoining areas may also be a pull factor. Anecdotal evidence also points to Rohingya women/girls being smuggled all the way up to Chittagong city, about four hours drive from the camps, as well as into brothels as far away as India

Information pertaining to sex trafficking is tightly controlled. Given the severity of social implications associated with such work, it is highly unlikely that Rohingya women or girls would go into this work voluntarily. However, as in other contexts where sexual exploitation is rife, it is possible that girls and women are deceived into accepting job opportunities related to housekeeping, and subsequently trafficked. Once entangled in this extralegal economy, these women would be highly susceptible to coercion.

Human Smuggling

Given the dire conditions in the camps, and perceived prospects of a better life elsewhere, many young Rohingya men seek opportunities to 'smuggle' themselves outside of the camps. This has been particularly true for the registered Rohingya, who acquired forged Bangladeshi identity cards and passports allowing them to move to other Bangladeshi cities and emigrate overseas. Passports and identity cards are not widespread amongst newer Rohingya refugee arrivals, who have a more difficult time acquiring these forged documents due to their financial constraints and apparent social/linguistic differences (many registered Rohingya can often pass as 'Chittagonian' Bangladeshis after having lived near them for the past three decades). However, this does not mean that human smuggling is not taking place; those that have connections in the diaspora (or even in Chittagong city) have a higher chance of being involved in human smuggling, although no clear estimates can be ascertained.[18]

Those from more prominent *gushti* are more likely to know a '*dalal*' or a broker, who can get forged documents, etc. However, this path has become increasingly difficult. Bangladesh recently transitioned to a major digital identification program, and all passports are now biometric. Forging these new documents has thus become very difficult. Still, some find a way, especially those with financial means.

Narcotics

According to local Bangladeshi media and anecdotal evidence from interviews with the host population, the town of Teknaf and its surrounding villages are thought to harbor 'gangs' of registered Rohingyas that have controlled the Ya Ba (methamphetamine) trade for the past several years. Though these reports are based on anecdotal evidence, and some are blatant anti-Rohingya propaganda, the arrest and seizure of dozens of local 'Bangladeshi' men in the Ya Ba (methamphetamine tablet) drug trade points to the fact that there are indeed well-connected smuggling and black market networks between these southern reaches of Bangladesh and Rakhine State. Documents of those arrested often label them as Bangladeshis, but some are reportedly

---

17 Molla, Mohammad Al-Masum. "Traffickers Preying on Rohingyas." The Daily Star, 26 Aug. 2019, www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/traffickers-preying-rohingyas-1760278.

18 Al Imran, Hassan F., and Mohammed N. Mian. The Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: A Vulnerable Group in Law and Policy. 2nd ed., vol. 8, Journal of Studies in Social Sciences, 2014, pp. 226–253, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272026723_The_Rohingya_Refugees_in_Bangladesh_A_Vulnerable_Group_in_Law_and_Policy.

Rohingya men with forged Bangladeshi documents. Registered Rohingya clans are also rumored to control the transportation 'syndicate' in Teknaf and surrounding villages, thereby making it easier to smuggle Ya Ba outside of the region, onward to Chittagong and Dhaka.

It is not clear that the communications blackout has had any impact on these activities, which tend to operate through pre-existing social networks, particularly through *gushti*. Kinship/trust is vital in these black market activities, and it is these same relations that support arrested or otherwise facing legal issues.

Considerations for Response Actors in Rakhine

'Return to place of origin' is not a straightforward proposition:

- Many family and clan units are now comprised of members from across Rakhine State. New marriages, for instance, often involve individuals from different townships. Decisions about relocation are likely to be determined primarily by the most influential members of newly formed *samaj*, and may as such marginalise the perspectives of less influential community members. Given that *samaj* leaders are most likely to be men, response actors should consider the ways in which repatriation may serve to isolate women – who may hail from villages far from the *samaj* leaders – and disrupt family dynamics, particularly domestic care arrangements dependent on proximity to extended family members.

The breakdown and reconstitution of the samaj structure has numerous implications for Rohingya returnees. For instance:

- The historical *samaj* structure, which formed the backbone of Rohingya social life for decades, did not survive the displacement to Bangladesh. Humanitarian response actors should prepare for the likelihood that more recent *samaj* may also strain or disband under the pressure of repatriation.

- Given the important role *samaj* committees play in providing for a community's most vulnerable, the repatriation process will likely disrupt newer *samaj* structures that could leave Rohingya returnee communities with even fewer safety nets. Humanitarian actors should proactively survey Rohingya communities to identify the 'basic services' currently provided by *samaj* leadership so as to better anticipate possible needs that may arise with repatriation and that may not be covered by or included within the common conceptualisation of 'basic services'.

- The dispute resolution role played by *samaj* committees in Rakhine pre-1992 have been undermined by decades of Myanmar, and more recently Bangladesh, government interference. Upon return, Rohingya communities will lack local mechanisms for dealing with resource conflicts – a dynamic which may be exacerbated by aid provision and which response actors should be careful to monitor. Additionally, repatriation of Rohingya would bring numerous famlies into conflict with the Myanmar government's ban on polygamy. Without a clearly defined *samaj* committee to mediate between marrying/married families and wives (in the context of plural marriage), women are particularly at risk of social exclusion.

Educated youth have enjoyed greater social influence within the camps than they might have had they remained in Rakhine. Similarly, women have been able to engage in leadership, volunteer, social, and educational activities that would have otherwise been unavailable to them on account of their gender. As a result, repatriation may leave many young people and women feeling frustrated by the lack of freedom and social recognition.

- If repatriated, educated youth will be highly incentivised to travel onward from Rakhine to other parts of Myanmar or to third-party countries in search of opportunities. The resulting 'brain drain' could hamper community development for years to come. Humanitarian actors should identify opportunities to align Rohingya youth skills with labour needs in the areas of return (and vice versa). For instance, youth may benefit from on-the-job agricultural, water management, mechanical and electrical skills training.

- Domestic disputes may increase if men attempt to return

to pre-displacement gender dynamics. Response actors should be careful to consider the ways in which interventions with gender empowerment aims could put women at risk if these interventions fail to adequately engage Rohingya men.

Within Myanmar, influence has often been predicated upon an individual's ability to communicate with Rakhine neighbours or Bamar government figures. Indeed, a 2018 study by USIP[19] found that the ability to speak Rakhine/Burmese was often a prerequisite to leadership in Rohingya communities. In camps, Rakhine/Burmese language skills are less immediately valuable to the community and thus bestow speakers with less social influence than English or Bengali. As of 2018, studies showed that only 27% of camp residents spoke Rakhine/Burmese.[20]

- Given the limited number of Rakhine/Burmese speakers, and the demographic specificities of this small group (predominantly older men), the risk of social exclusion in the event of return is particularly acute. Response actors should prepare to hire Rohingya-speaking staff, particularly women and young people, to counter the risk of gender and age-based social exclusion.

- Government-recognised leadership positions (such as Village Tract Administration) may only be made available to Rakhine/Burmese speaking Rohingya, leaving non-Rakhine/Burmese speakers with limited opportunities for engagement, regardless of prior experience. This loss of influence could create friction between community members and should be carefully considered in hiring volunteers and forming community committees.

- Those without necessary language skills may seek to build influence by adopting exclusionary, or even austere practices of avoidance, undermining intercommunity resilience and social cohesion. Response actors should recognise that a lack of intercommunal communication may be a deliberate strategy and not necessarily a factor of limited opportunity.

19 United States Institute for Peace, 'The Religious Landscape in Myanmar's Rakhine State', 2018

20 Translators Without Borders, 'The language lesson: what we've learned about communicating with Rohingya refugees,' 2018.

Camp-based Rohingya refugees have been able to pursue religious formation more freely than ever before. Given the continued limitations placed on Rohingya religious freedom within Rakhine State, it is highly likely that conflicts over interpretation and practice may emerge should refugees be repatriated.

- The lack of access to religious education means Rohingya have historically demonstrated religious piety through their dress and practice. In the event of repatriation, the *samaj's* traditional role in policing norms and religious observances may create conflicts as returning community leaders seek to influence the modalities through which the Rohingya who remained in Rakhine interpret their faith. Humanitarian actors should not assume that all Rohingya Muslims share the same religious beliefs and practices. Rather, actors should be cognizant of this dynamic when communicating with or through religious leaders and mindful of emergent intercommunal conflicts.

Rohingya in Rakhine State, who may have had prior exposure to the mostly apolitical teachings of Tablighi Jamat missionaries from Yangon or elsewhere, may have in Cox's Bazar been exposed to more explicitly political messaging.

- Increased exposure to teachings which blend religious and political objectives could mean that ARSA's political aspirations need not be precluded by a religious re-orientation. For example, ARSA may seek to follow Hezbollah's model, providing for basic services and welfare as both a secular and spiritual authority. Response actors should be aware that the line between religion and politics in Myanmar is more ill-defined than some might suggest, and should be aware of the ways in which Rohingya CSOs and other social service organisations might be affected.

- Lack of opportunity for genuine and meaningful political representation within Myanmar could catalyse radicalisation along pathways established in the camps but previously of little interest to youth.

Mixed experiences with democracy may lead Rohingya to develop novel ideas about governance that conflict with Myanmar government and/or response agency agendas.

18

- Given years of instability, Rohingya communities may prioritise efficacy over direct election of leaders. This creates a strong incentive for strongmen to establish themselves as de-facto leaders. Humanitarian response actors should be aware of the way such figures might seek to control natural and agency-provided resources as a means of shoring up their position of authority.

- Women's participation in sub-block governance appears to have had an impact, at least to some extent, on attitudes toward female leadership amongst some Rohingya women. Unless similar opportunities can be guaranteed in Rakhine State, response actors should be cognizant of what these Rohingya women would be sacrificing by returning.

Crime networks already thrive cross border; repatriation may only exacerbate certain dynamics.

- Sex trafficking of Rohingya girls/women is a significant risk that will not necessarily be mitigated by repatriation. Rather, vulnerable girls/women may be coerced into travelling further distances and crossing government checkpoints. Girls and women engaged in sex work in the tourist areas outside of the camps could be isolated by repatriation if they are unable to leave their employment when their respective families return to Myanmar. Humanitarian response actors concerned with this issue should consider partnering with grassroots/local Bangladeshi NGOs such as the Nari Nirjaton Protirodh Foundation, which specifically works to address gender-based violence and empower women.

- Voluntary human smuggling is likely to persist in the event of repatriation. However, migration pathways may shift as the option of travelling via Yangon becomes more feasible. Yangon-based Rohingya communities are likely to have broader communications networks that reach into a greater number of third countries. Humanitarian actors should be aware that there may be safeguarding concerns in urban centres, particularly Yangon, but also Mandalay and other cities with large Muslim populations, which may serve as stop-over points for outward migration.

- The narcotics trade benefits from poor governance and instability. It is also highly profitable for those who control the means of production. There is a risk that repatriated Rohingya may find themselves increasingly entangled in systems of power and social influence defined at least in part by drug smugglers and their capital – not least armed groups who may operate in the area. Humanitarian response actors should look into the possibility of developing cross-border coordination mechanisms for monitoring and mitigating the associated risks. ●

COAR
Center for Operational Analysis and Research