

UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES OF ROHINGYA REFUGEE: A STUDY ON THE PERCEPTIONS OF HOST COMMUNITY

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Abstract

Rohingya refugees came into a massive influx in Bangladesh in 2017 and overwhelmed the camp areas with myriads of problems especially degrading environment and creating social chaos. This study seeks to understand the perception of local people about Rohingya refugees regarding the impacts of refugees on the host community from both environmental and social perspectives. The study finds that in the initial period of the refugee influx, local people showed their sympathy and provided support to help these forced migrants. However, the perception of local people started to change over time as they believed that because of the massive influx of refugees, the host environment lost a thousand acres of forest, more than half of the total hill lands, and vast biodiversity. Moreover, due to the establishment of refugee camps, the host communities face several social problems like theft, robbery, hijacking, teasing, violence, smuggling, etc. The long presence of refugees in an area with scarce resources brings social tensions and competition that may turn into social conflict if there is a lack of proper surveillance and policies from respective authorities.

Keywords: Rohingya, Refugee, Host community, Environmental degradation, Social problems

Introduction

Currently, Bangladesh is experiencing a crisis that is widely known as the ‘Rohingya Refugee Crisis. According to the United Nations Status of Refugees (UNHCR, 1979:5), a person is a refugee when he or she is about to “owing to a well-founded

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fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country". The Rohingya is a mainly stateless Muslim minority from the Rakhine State of Myanmar. The latest exodus began on 25 August 2017, when violence broke out in Myanmar's Rakhine State. According to the UNHCR, over 720,000 refugees have fled to Bangladesh since 25 August 2017 and took shelter in Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. At present, the Kutupalong refugee camp in this area is one of the largest refugee camps in the world. Besides, this central and original camp, there are many adjacent camps operated by the government, even though some of them do not belong in the official camp record. Since 1991, many refugees left Myanmar and taken shelter in these camps and their surroundings. Finally, in 2017, the Kutupalong camp, camps in Ghumdum, Balukhali, Thangkhali, and camps in other areas blended into one another because of the huge refugee influx. The refugee influx put impacts on host communities in diverse ways although it received extremely limited attention (Grindheim, 2013).

The Rohingyas are thought to be the most maltreated and persecuted refugee groups living stateless for over six generations while fleeing to nearby developing countries- particularly Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Thailand and still having no change. The overwhelmed and overcrowded campsite remains dismal with poor mental health, an unhygienic milieu, endemic malnutrition, and high rate of physical or sexual abuse (Milton et. al. 2017; Albert, 2017).

The continuing refugee influx generates additional stress on the abysmal poverty-ridden nation. They are answerable for the friction in the local community, as they have constant competition in the local employment market and are eagerly willing to work for lesser pay. A big concern was environmental degradation, for example, deforestation happened because of the collection of firewood for daily cooking and building shelters. In addition to that, there rises acute social instability as some of the Rohingya refugees are tangled with Islamic extremists and drug traffickers (Milton et. al. 2017).

However, to ensure a lasting solution for the Rohingyas, the socio-economic conditions of the host communities have been worsened and complicated. The Rohingya refugees dwelling in camp or non-camp areas have been subject to living miserably without ample access to basic needs, safety from violence, freedom of movement, and amicability of the local community while they have to face numerous forms of discrimination. Therefore, this study attempts to understand

the local perception for interpreting the dynamics of social interaction between two sides. Specifically, this study focuses on local perceptions of environmental degradation and social tensions accelerated by the massive Rohingya refugee influx.

Review of Literature

In 2001, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) released a statement that the displacement of large numbers of people causes a significant negative impact on the environment. The negative impacts raise concerns over the environmental sustainability of refugee camps as well as the consequent effects on the social and economic welfare of host communities (UNHCR, 2001). The characteristics (unplanned and self-settled or organized settlements by concerned authorities) of the refugee camp directly influence both the host environment and community (Jackson 1997). The massive Liberian refugee influx causes a sharp decline in environmental resources and a notable rise in social vices (Codjoe; Quartey; Tagoe; and Reed, 2013). Refugee camps and massive refugee influx result in the loss of natural resources (Black 1994; Ferris 1993; Ghimire 1994; Hoerz 1995). Furthermore, most refugee camps suffer from a lack of pure drinking water and proper sanitation. In such a situation massive refugee influx causes more acute health consequences. Diarrhoea, malnutrition, and morbidity are quite common health problems in refugee camps (Shepherd 1995; Cronin, Shrestha, Cornier, Abdalla, Ezard, & Aramburu, 2008).

Cox's Bazar lost a large forest land (2283 hectare) because of refugee settlements and such rapid destruction triggered ecological problems and biodiversity loss (Hassan, Smith, Walker, Rahman, & Southworth, 2018). The Teknaf peninsula is one of the ecologically critical areas of Bangladesh and the rapid growth of refugee camps causes substantial loss of vegetation as these refugee camps destroyed forest land for cooking and firewood purposes (Imtiaz, 2018). Most of the refugee people earn their livelihood by the direct destruction of natural resources; they select random fishing from nearby water bodies and forest cutting from hills as their primary sources of income. Moreover, job opportunities as day laborers in nearby dwellings open another opportunity for them. However, such livelihood approaches generated competition and conflicts with native residents (Rahman, 2018).

The existence of refugee camps can upsurge social ills among host communities; this can include excessive drinking, gambling, prostitution, and crime (Codjoe &

Bilsborrow, 2012; Crisp, 2000; Dick, 2002; Hampshire, Porter, Kilpatrick, Kyei, Adjaloo, & Oppong, 2008; Rumbach, 2007).

Similarly, the perception of local communities is overly critical where refugee camps remain for a long time. In many countries where job opportunity is not very much available, there is a common perception and fear among local communities that refugees will take the available jobs and they will suffer from unemployment (Zetter & Ruaudel, 2016). Many migrant people attempt to integrate into host communities' labour markets for their livelihoods; but such integration mostly depends on the perception of local communities (Mencutek & Nashwan, 2021). Therefore, there is an attempt to understand the local perception for explaining the different dynamics of social interaction between the host and the refugees. The local perceptions about environmental degradation and myriad social tensions augmented by the massive Rohingya refugee influx have been studied.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the perceptions of local people about the impacts of refugees on the environment and society of the host community, the ethnic competition theory which is also known as the ethnic competition thesis can be used. It supposes that the constant confrontation and hostile relations between groups augment the increasing number of adherents of the 'outgroup' residing in the neighbourhood. When the numbers of one group keep increasing and being more proximate to other groups, there begins a negative relation and view of another group. The assumed apparatus underlying this is that people have a feeling of threat by the unexpected presence of various ethnic groups and experience 'ethnic competition' (Coenders, Lubbers, Scheepers, & Verkuyten, 2008).

Two dominants as well as complementary theories: realistic group conflict theory and social identity theory (Scheepers, Gijsberts, and Coenders, 2002) are the basis of delineating the ethnic competition theoretical framework. This study has used the direction of realistic group conflict theory. This theory presumes that the constant competition among different ethnic groups for material and economic group interests like- scarce resources (jobs, houses, etc.), values, and group identities (Coenders, Lubbers, Scheepers, & Verkuyten, 2008) triggers conflict of interest which creates adverse outgroup reactions and hostile inter-group attitudes (Coser, 1998; LeVine & Campbell, 1972; Austin & Worchel, 1979). The 'us-them' thinking of ethnic groups pushes their relationships into negative directions that are a concern for many (Coenders, Lubbers, Scheepers, & Verkuyten, 2008).

After the presence of Rohingya refugees in Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, for their subsistence, they desperately used the scarce resources previously used by the locals. This creates a huge tension and conflict of interests between these two groups. Besides, they began to work with low pay which pushes the locals to unemployment and there is also us-them thinking between them.

Methodology

This study followed an exploratory research design and applied both quantitative and qualitative research methods to understand the perception of local people about the impacts of refugees on the environment and society. Two data collection methods were used to collect primary data from the study area- survey and FGDs. In a sample survey, local people participated to express their perceptions of the environmental and social impacts of Rohingya refugees. Non-probability convenience sampling was used to select the participants of the study. A total number of 120 respondents from local communities were selected to participate in the survey. Also, to depict the holistic picture and also to understand the view of the Rohingya refugee, 4 Focus Groups Discussions (FGDs) were arranged among which two groups were formed by the composition of the refugee and two other groups were created by the local people. Researchers adopted face-to-face interview techniques for sample surveys and a semi-structured questionnaire was administered for collecting survey data. FGDs were formed by the voluntary participation of refugees and locals and two separate guide questionnaires were used to conduct FGDs. Researchers selected the Kutupalong refugee camp as it is the largest refugee camp (13 km²) in the world. This camp is located in Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, and informally started in 1991. The refugee camps are located in various places in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh (Figure 1) among which Kutupalong refugee camp has been selected for the study as it is the largest one. All the natives who live nearby of the Kutupalong camp are the population of the study. To organize survey data, SPSS and MS Excel were used. To analyse survey data, percentage, and central tendency techniques were used whereas to analyse FGDs' data, thematic analysis was used to analyse detailed qualitative data.

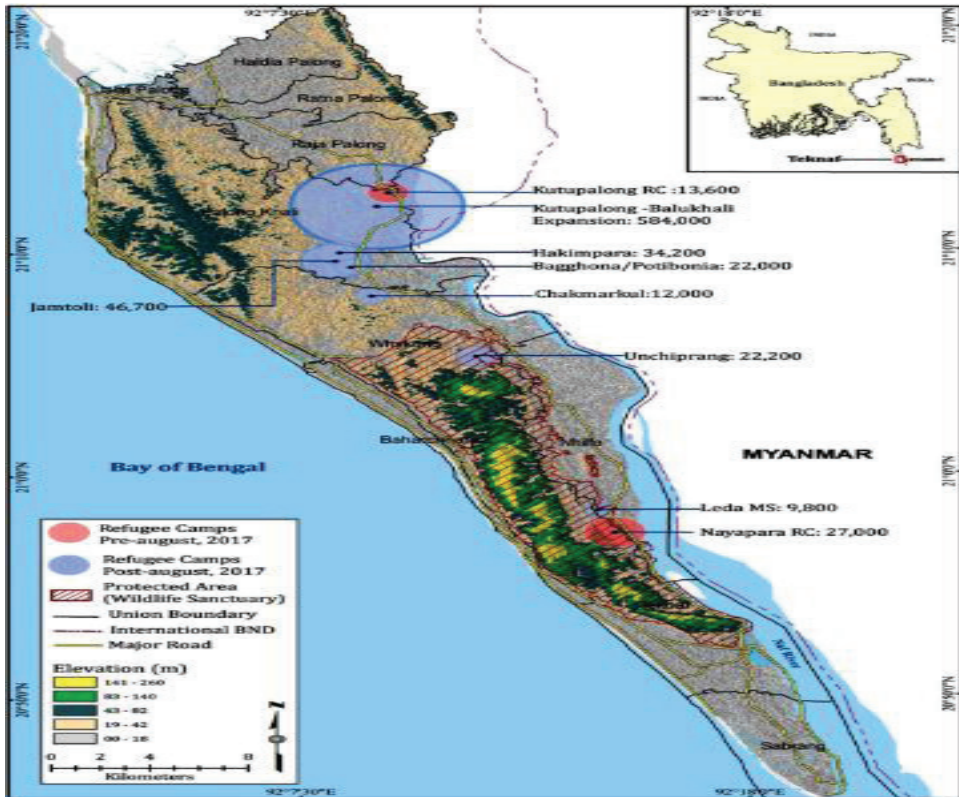


Figure 1: Map of the All Rohingya Refugee Camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Source: Hassan, Mohammad Mehedy, Audrey Culver Smith, Katherine Walker, Munshi Khaledur Rahman, and Jane Southworth. "Rohingya refugee crisis and forest cover change in Teknaf, Bangladesh." *Remote Sensing* 10, no. 5 (2018): 689

General Socio-demographic Scenario of Respondents

After the independence of Bangladesh, the Myanmar government tries to push the Rohingya people from the Rakhine state to this country. In 1990, informally the Kutupalong camp and other fixed camps started with more than 250000 Rohingya refugees. However, after the massive entry of refugees in 2017, the host areas are starting to face several socio-economic and environmental problems. Although the government of Bangladesh allows refugees to come into the country, the area is not capable to support such a vast amount of people. In the first few months, refugee people lived around the border areas near Myanmar. After that, thousands of migrant people joined the Kutupalong camp and other government-recognized camps and became the world's biggest refugee stations.

In this study, among all the respondents who participated in the survey, there was 76 percent male, and the rests of them were female. The religion of the participants is crucial here because Rohingya refugees are Muslim, and they got mass sympathy from the host country at the beginning of the massive refugee influx. Therefore, this study carefully ensures the ratio of Muslim respondents to understand their perception after the long existence of refugee camps. Although there were Hindu and Christian, major respondents were Muslims (80 percent); the following figure shows the percentage distribution of the religion of participants.

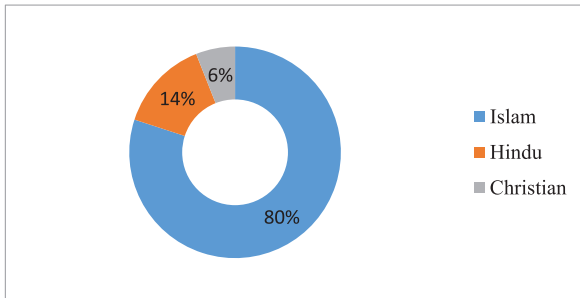


Figure 2: Religion of the respondents
Source: Field Data, 2019

The youngest participant was 21 years old, and the age of the oldest respondent was 62. The median age was 40 as well as the range of age was 41. Both highly educated (16 years of schooling) and illiterate (0 years of schooling) took participation in the sample survey. The mean years of schooling were more than 6 and more than 50 percent of the respondents completed 5 years of schooling. The standard deviation value of respondents’ age is 11.33 and the year of starting schooling is around 5 years. Respondents of this study also come from different occupational backgrounds. There were students, service holders, small businessmen, farmers, fishermen, and others. The majority of the respondents were small businessmen and farmers. The following table demonstrates the profession of the participants.

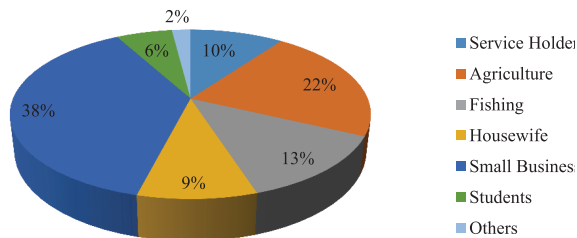


Figure 3: Occupation of the respondents
Source: Field Data, 2019

The living standard in the refugee camp is extremely low. They are suffering from the shortage of housing, water, sanitation, etc. as found in FGDs. All of the settlements are made of bamboo, wood, and leaves. Most of the respondents of FGDs said, “Our entire family lives in a small place. Moreover, our house becomes wet and dirty during the rainy season”.

As the birth rate of Rohingya refugees is exceedingly high, thus a small dwelling is not sufficient for them. Without necessary life-supporting tools like cooking tools, clothes and bedding they have no furniture in their tiny house. Moreover, they do not have the access to pure drinking water as well as water for other purposes. Recently, some international NGOs like UNICEF, Oxfam, IOM, UHNCR etc. have built pure drinking water points in the camp, but refugees claim the water points are not enough for the huge amount of people. Furthermore, though recently different international organizations; such as WaterAid, and WASH have built healthy sanitation in the camp, the number of sanitation toilets does not suffice. As many people use a single toilet, it is quite impossible to maintain hygiene there.

Perception of Local People about Environmental Degradation due to the Refugee Community

Native people think refugee camps have extensive impacts on the environment as they pose a great threat to the agricultural land and natural resources for their abrupt and rapid expansion for the settlement. This study explores the perceptions of local people based on their experience with the change of environment before and after the huge refugee influx in the camps. The field data show that 84 percent of respondents believe that due to the expansion of the refugee camps in 2017, the host environment is extensively experiencing rapid environmental degradation, and the others accept it as normal. In the specific case, about 86 percent of respondents think that refugee camps are responsible for the higher rate of deforestation while 88 percent mentioned that refugees cut the hills of the area and 84 percent opined those refugees cause water pollution at the camp area. About 72 percent of them acknowledge that refugees are not responsible for destroying farmland as they build up their shelter in hilly areas and about 55 percent believe that because of refugee settlements, biodiversity was endangered in the last few years. Similarly, a huge amount of household and human waste causes severe air pollution and unpleasant smell in the host environment; more than 50 percent of participants agree that the world’s biggest refugee camp is responsible for air pollution.

The following graph represents the perception of locals:

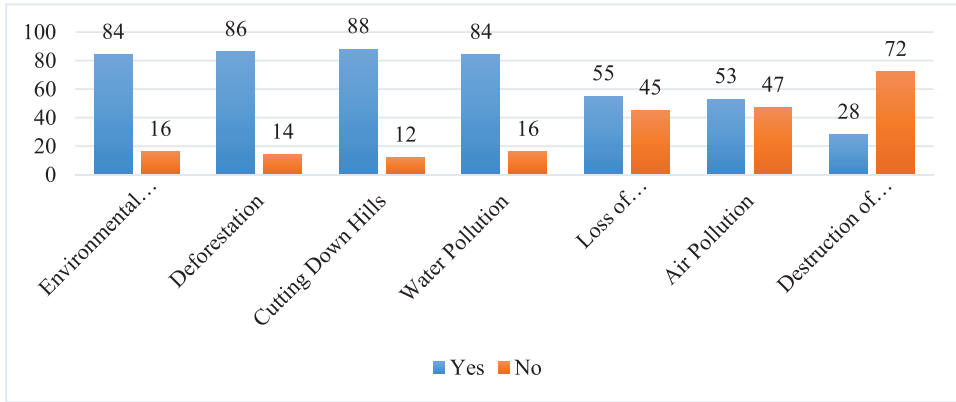


Figure 4: Perception of locals about environmental degradation due to refugees
Source: Field Data, 2019

In the group discussions, refugees claim that they lack access to water; however, local people said that refugees are responsible for water pollution and water scarcity. Local communities blame the refugee people for not using sanitary toilets and polluting the air and water with human waste. They also reveal that the migrants have destroyed both forests and hills in the area. According to them:

The area was green, and the air was fresh; but, after the entry of refugees, the total ecosystem collapsed. Refugees cut thousands of trees and hectares of hills to build their houses. On the other hand, refugees said they just cut a limited number of trees and hills to make their shelter.

Both locals and native people who participated in the FGDs explain the reasons for environmental degradation from their perspective. To arrange their livelihood, refugees primarily depend on natural resources like trees, water, and fish. According to the refugees, they extract resources (cutting trees and branches) from the forest to fulfil their basic needs of shelter and fuel for cooking. They acknowledged when they first came to Bangladesh, they had nothing with them to build a temporary house; therefore, they cut down trees from the reserve forest. They asserted they had no intention to destroy forest resources, but they were helpless to do that. One participant from the refugee group said:

We were bound to cut down trees; without trees, it was impossible to build a shelter. Because when we left our country, we could not bring anything with us except life.

Locals, on the other hand, believe that thousands of acres of reserve forest have been lost as a result of Rohingya arrivals. They think that making shelters is not the only reason refugees destructing forest land. Some of the locals said, before 2017, refugees were small in number and they cut trees secretly; but, after the influx of refugees, they started cutting trees openly. A few participants claimed that:

The government and various NGOs have provided them safe shelters inside the camps; nonetheless, the refugees did not stop cutting down trees. They cut down trees illegally and sell them on the black market. As it is not their land, they do not hesitate to cut down trees on a massive scale

They purchased cutting materials like a saw, and axe from the campsite market as these are also used in building shelters. The local illegal traders also provided them those tools as mentioned by local people's FGDs.

In case of water use, the situation is much more critical. Generally, as it is a hilly area, in the dry season local people face acute drinking water shortages. The situation has further deteriorated because of the massive refugee influx in this area; the water levels fall rapidly. One of the participants from local groups who worked as social workers in the Kutupalong refugee camps addresses this problem with some statistics. He said that before the gigantic refugee influx, there were just more than a hundred deep tube wells; but, currently, this number is more than 20,000. The sudden extreme rise in the number of tube wells and quantity demand of water causes a sharp fall in groundwater level. Therefore, the water scarcity problem is severe in both local and refugee communities. Some of the participants from the refugee group mentioned that although several volunteer organizations installed a lot of tube wells and sanitary latrines inside the camp, the water of the tube wells become contaminated by the sanitary latrines as they are remarkably close to each other. Therefore, such shallow tube wells could have resulted in outbreaks of water-related diseases. Moreover, native respondents said that refugee camps are highly responsible for destroying the hills; to build shelter they destroyed hills and make plain land. When the hills were cut indiscriminately to give Rohingyas shelter, the hills lost their natural habitat, and vegetation covers have gone away as well. According to the statement of some participants, more than half of the hill land has disappeared. Besides the physical environment, biodiversity like animals and birds lost their home. Especially, elephants suffer from habitat loss and fragmentation. In general, the local people believe that the Rohingya refugees are solely responsible for the total degradation of the environment of this area; they are not welcoming them anymore. The following statements of participants

represent the common perception of the locals about the refugees:

Rohingyas have been living here for a long time; due to them, the overall environment here has been ruined. The government should arrange their repatriation as soon as possible; otherwise, in a few years this place will not be suitable for living.

Perception of Local People about the Social Impacts of Refugees

Likewise, refugee camps also have various social problems along with environmental impacts. As the refugees are not welcomed by the locals as well as a refugee has a different culture, therefore, mistrust, and misunderstanding is normal phenomena here. The study found that theft, hijacking, drug smuggling, teasing, and conflict are increasing significantly. From the survey data, it is apparent that the stealing rate is rising expressively in the host area after the massive expansion of refugee camps; 68 percent of participants agreed that the stealing rate is higher in the camp area than ever. Similarly, the hijacking rate is also increased more pointedly than ever; more than 65 percent of participants in the survey agreed that Rohingya refugees are responsible for the high rate of hijacking. The most serious allegation against Rohingya Refugees is Drug Smuggling; over 75 percent of respondents agreed that they are committing drug smuggling from Myanmar to Bangladesh. In addition, locals, especially those who go to educational institutions and the guardians of the young girls claim that refugees are pledging to tease; more than 30 percent shared that they and their family experienced teasing whereas over 60 percent do not agree with this issue. Moreover, about 40 percent of the participants opined that those refugees from the Rohingya camps are responsible for creating conflict in the host area.

The following figure represents the opinion of the natives regarding the crime rate.

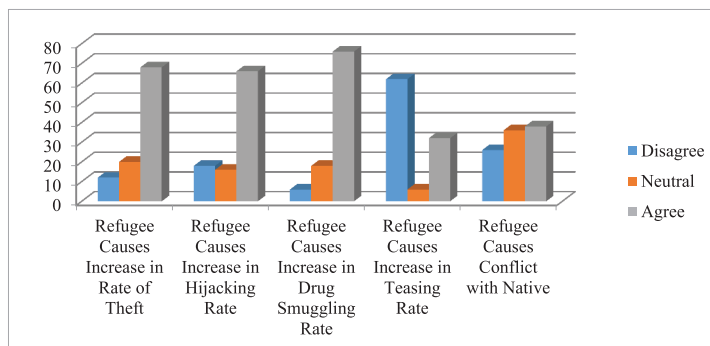


Figure 5: Locals' opinion regarding social problems due to refugees

Source: Field Data, 2019

Furthermore, native people have a specific opinion about the overall rise of crime rate, extra pressure on livelihoods as well as on labour market that indirectly affect both community and the environment. The following table refers to local people's opinions in this regard.

Table 1: Overall perception of local people about the impacts of refugees

| Perception of local people about the impacts of refugees | Yes (percent) | No (percent) |
|--|---------------|--------------|
| Increase in Overall Crime Rate | 72 | 28 |
| Refugees' Livelihood Causes Extra Pressure on Ecosystem | 80 | 20 |
| Refugee Affect Labour Market Adversely | 66 | 34 |

Source: Field Data, 2019

The table illustrates that over 70 percent of respondents said there is a dramatic rising in the overall crime rate after the massive expansion of refugee camps. People agreed that refugee camps put extra pressure on the ecosystem as they try to earn a livelihood from the local areas; 80 percent of respondents said that the ecosystem is experiencing extra pressure to effort the refugees. Similarly, about 70 percent of people mentioned that as refugees are trying to earn money to support their lives, there is a negative effect on the labour market. As refugees are willing to work at a low wage, native laborers do not get an adequate wage.

More detailed scenarios of the social impacts of refugee camps have been presented through the focus group discussions. In these discussions, local people state that Rohingyas are responsible for massive environmental problems and diverse types of social problems too. Almost every participant in the discussion group thinks that because of the vast influx of refugees, the host community lost its normal settings. Crime and violence rise sharply after the colossal influx of refugees. According to them, the rate of stealing, hijacking, robbery, eve-teasing, fighting, etc. touches the pick point. One educated and middle female participant accused Rohingya refugees in the following manner:

Rohingya refugees have turned the area into a heaven of anarchy; People here are afraid to leave their homes after dusk. Even during the day, young girls cannot move freely. We are disturbed by the harassment of Rohingyas.

Most of the local participants address that Rohingya camps are now the centre of the drug business. Refugees sell the drug to local people and conduct a range of criminal activities. Police and other monitoring forces are not adequate for such an enormous number of refugees. Like male refugees, female Rohingyas are joining

in illegal activities like prostitution and drug smuggling. They mentioned that a Rohingya prostitute is available for a very minimum payment; therefore, young locals are getting engaged in such unacceptable activities. Moreover, some of the local participants doubt that these refugees are also involved in the illegal arms trade. Some local respondents believe that already some of these refugees have aligned themselves with local power elites and participating in illegal activities. The following statement represents the perception of local people about these refugees in this regard:

The movement of Rohingya refugees is very suspicious. The local people are always terrified because of them. Some local influential people are sheltering these refugees for their own political and economic purposes and protecting them from the surveillance of the police and the administration.

Besides social disturbance, Rohingya refugee causes economic pressure on local communities. Participants acknowledge that Rohingya refugees' labour is cheaper than local labour; therefore, many local day laborers are suffering to get job contracts and sufficient wages. Rohingya refugees are like a reserve army to the labour industry and continuously produce tension for local workers. Local fishermen and informal workers are facing the same situation. Local people claim, although refugees are getting relief from many international volunteer organizations, they are desperate to earn more from the local economy and natural resources. All the participants from two local groups alleged that competition between locals and refugees became more visible. Such unhealthy competition may cause serious conflict in near future. The following statement of one participant indicates the severity of the social tension that exists in local people's minds:

At present, we, the locals, are the minority and the Rohingya refugees are the majority of this area. Rohingya refugees have been embroiled in numerous disputes with locals since 2017; although they were isolated incidents and small in size. But day by day the Rohingya refugees are getting organized; the locals are scared of their behaviour. Many locals suspect that the Rohingyas will soon attack the locals in an organized way and try to dominate.

On the other hand, the refugees said they are living an inhuman life here and they had mixed perceptions about native people. Some refugees said that they are grateful to the locals for their support and shelter whereas some other claims that few locals abuse them. They do not accept that some refugees are engaged in criminal activities and emphasize that local elites systematically blame them and take benefit of their helpless situation. They said that some young locals try to abuse their women and push them to do illegal activities. However, they believe

that they are not responsible for the high crime rate and hope that local people will continue their support as they lost everything in Myanmar.

Conclusion

Local people welcome the exploited Rohingya refugees during the cold-hearted military operation against the Muslim minorities of Myanmar. However, the mammoth influx and long-time settlements became pressure on both environment and communities. Local people believe that refugee camps become threats to the host environment as it brings changes in normal settings. Due to the extra demand for water, the host's groundwater level drops suddenly as well as the surface water sources become polluted. Besides the major environmental damage, the local people are experiencing several social problems. The crime rate increased several times more than the prior records. The overall analysis represents that the perception of local people is changing about refugees as they are suffering many social and environmental problems. The changing perception of local people generates social tension that may turn into social conflict in near future. Local people accordingly demand that international organizations and leading political leaders of the world should focus on the Rohingya crisis as the host areas facing severe social and environmental degradation.

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