

Listening to refugees

lessons learnt from the past

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In 2010, representatives of UNHCR came to Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB) with the proposition to do some work in the camps engaging participatory processes. It took us a while to decide on what we would do if we were to take up the work. RIB was a research organisation specialising in participatory action research with marginalised communities but it had not previously worked with refugees nor had it worked in that particular geographical area where the camps were situated i.e. Ukhia and Teknaf in the Cox's Bazar district. So we responded that we were willing to work in the official refugee camps in principle but we needed to know more about that area and the people with whom we wished to work. Hence a 10-day scoping exercise was arranged, out of which five days were to be spent in the field. This was facilitated by UNHCR but it was up to us to determine the extent and content of the exercise. It was one of the most memorable visits—almost like a journey to the unknown—that my colleague Suraiya Begum and I had undertaken in our research careers.

It was a part of the country with which we had no exposure till then. Sure, many of us have dipped into the Bay of Bengal in the resort town of Cox's Bazar, but how much did we know of the people, their languages, the lie of the land, the weather elements which we had to encounter during our stay there? Our first task was to get a good local interpreter. We found Rashed Sorwar, at that time a young student of Cox's Bazar College, but who later along with Mobasherul Alam and Protit Mutsuddi became a steadfast colleague and stalwart friend.

Since we chose formally not to be part of the UNHCR ensemble as that may elicit a different kind of response, we did not have permission to enter the official camps. Instead we went to the



Early childhood learning could help them get the care that they often lacked as well as offer them coping mechanisms that could help their trauma and misery.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

makeshift site near Kutupalong camp where many undocumented Rohingyas had set up shacks and where refugees from camps also came to chat with us in one of the roadside tea-shops. We travelled as far as we could do by land to the "Land's End" point of Bangladesh known as Shah Porir Dwip. It was almost a mystical journey. As we crossed Teknaf, we came upon milestones which indicated the distance in a peculiar way: Shah Porir Dwip 4.15 km, 3.14 km and so on. My colleague Suraiya pointed it out and we wondered for a while. Then it occurred to us after the .15 km, that there was no more Bangladesh at least in terms of land; there was only the sea. We encountered too the thrill of seeing the mountains of Myanmar across the River Naf and across the jetty at Land's End. How near and yet how far! We took a surreptitious journey to the Ghumdhum border with the help of our friend Rashed where we encountered the high electrical fences of the land border with Myanmar and also the point where refugees were first sent back by the 1978 agreement.

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