

Between ifs and buts dwindles the future of the Rohingya



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As we approach the six-year mark of the unprecedented 2017 influx of the Rohingya from Rakhine State in Myanmar, I cannot help but wonder if we are really doing enough for the people who sought support to be alive with safety and dignity. It was between August 24-25, 2017, in the weeks that followed escaping death and persecution, when the Rohingya sought refuge in Cox's Bazar. They had fled to Bangladesh earlier too; numerous times over the last 50 or 60 years. However, the influx of 2017 was significantly different. The violence had been unleashed with no bars held. The genocide was being committed and it took years to get the global leadership to acknowledge this.

If we go back and look at August-September of 2017 and how Bangladesh responded, one would feel convinced that humanity prevailed. Bangladesh could have turned its back, built walls, kept them at bay and let the Rohingya fend for themselves. But, as a nation, we opted for humanity and chose our love for fellow humans. The first responders were the communities in the surrounding areas of Cox's Bazar, Ukhiya, Teknaf, and Shah Porir Dwp. They opened up their homes and shared whatever limited resources they had. Local authorities and government agencies followed. Since then, Bangladesh has been hosting one of the largest and most vulnerable refugee populations in the world. The camps today are a testimony of all that was invested to try and make living bearable for the Rohingya communities, with the resources available on the ground and what was coming forth from global actors as humanitarian aid.

Six years later, over 60,000 Rohingya have been born during this period, taking the total number of refugees way beyond a million. These children have joined their parents and are living in the camps. And they have difficulty understanding camp life and, on top of that, try to comprehend why they have been told to face shortages as they will receive less ration, given the cut in food aid twice, from \$12 to \$8 in just four months! The Rohingya response is facing a severe funding crisis, illustrated by the two recent cuts in food assistance. The spotlight should thus be on the worsening humanitarian situation and compounding requirements of the Rohingya.

What about the present and future of the Rohingya refugees? Is it a battle of numbers that gives political actors the right to dehumanise them? We wish to believe that crises create the push for alternatives and that, in this case, collective actions will be towards this direction.

Presently, I experience feelings of pessimism as we are dealing with

situations where we, as humanitarian actors, are often told that humanitarian aid for the Rohingya is shrinking. In fact, it has already shrunk, which is why, as of mid-August, funds for the Joint Response Plan only covered 28.9 percent of the \$876 million yearly that humanitarian agencies had appealed for in 2023. Global leadership must have a list of explanations as to why they have less funds available and thus explain the cut. But why am I even surprised, when I live in a world where political actors have decided to abandon Palestinian refugees, Syrian refugees, and many marginalised communities? Geopolitics and geo-economics determine the availability of funds and the prioritisation for fund distribution, and we face the risk of seeing history be repeated.

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Rohingya people living in Cox's Bazar, Teknaf, and Ukhiya are humans with the right to life, food, water, education, and dignity. Thus, the fear of the Rohingya being further ignored is a prominent concern of mine. I cannot but wonder if it is the ethnicity of the refugees and the colour of their skin that determines how much and for how long humanitarian aid will be available to them.

I truly want to believe that I am wrong. I want to believe that we celebrate the diversity of humankind. But is humanity struggling to practise universal values that it has been chanting and teaching to the downtrodden for nearly 80 years? Do we not want to reaffirm the purposes

and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the core international human rights treaties? Of course, we are all equal as humans, but some are more equal than others – to paraphrase a widely quoted line from George Orwell's Animal Farm. Such differences are based on power, gender, ethnicity, money, natural resources, and arms trade, as evidenced in multiple countries at multiple levels.

My other feelings are of hope and optimism. This is based on how opportunities have been created for communities to adapt to their conditions in the camps, develop new learning skills, reduce reliance on aid, and advance their livelihoods through skills development and capacity-building programmes in community centres across the camps.

We are also going through a period of heavy rainfall, which has caused severe damage to shelters, facilities, and infrastructure, adding to the predicament of the already fragile displaced communities. Thus, greater effort and investment are the needs of the hour.

Remaining fixated on the return of the Rohingya is understandable, as they have the right to return to their home. Having acknowledged this right, it is important to remember that even if repatriation is informed and voluntary, we cannot ignore the fact that such a return will be a huge undertaking and require the coordination of multiple actors on the parts of Myanmar, Bangladesh and of the global actors. A possible repatriation calls for intensive bilateral and multilateral negotiations, as it could be a long-term process spanning years. In the meantime, Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh will require the flow of humanitarian aid without any disruption until repatriation is completed.

However, before all this, if there ever has been a momentous time for humanity to exist and act, it is now. This is true in respect to climate justice, gender justice and justice for the Rohingya. We often tell the youth of today how brave, imaginative, innovative they are, and how they will lead the transformation we seek for justice. I therefore want to draw the attention of the youth leadership across the globe, to nudge them to unite and collectively call for the rights of refugees across the world. Rohingya youth are no different. They aspire, want to learn, and lead. They dream of a better world for themselves on their own land, as well as wherever they may settle eventually. We must acknowledge that there's no reaching the SDG goals until we have met the needs of the Rohingya youth. We cannot deny their presence, nor their rights for sustainable development for a secure future.

Let collective efforts for durable and effective solutions be imminent and not be subject to geopolitics and geo-economics alone. Instead, focus on the humanitarian and rights perspective. Let us stand in solidarity and work for the rights and justice of the Rohingya.



PHOTO: UNICEF

We must invest in educational research to be able to upscale reforms that work particularly for us.

EDUCATING EDUCATION

An academic's two cents on education reform



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As a nation, we continue to have a lot to complain about. Today, students are still subjected to, more or less, the same so-called education that we or our seniors experienced. What can we do? My passion and interest being in matters of the education system, I've come to the conclusion that I can at least raise important questions that we have mostly overlooked in our approach to education in Bangladesh in the hope to accelerate critical conversations.

First, what is the purpose of education? What compels us to pursue education? In a thought-provoking article, published in 1997, David F Labaree, professor of education at Stanford University, highlighted three "conflicting" goals of education and discussed the growing dominance of the social mobility goal, and how it conformed education to a commodity for status attainment and incentivised the pursuit of credentials over knowledge acquirement. This is relatable because, in line with the aspects of credential inflation and the meritocratic labour-market-oriented ideology of "social mobility," educational pursuit in Bangladesh is mostly motivated by the desire to get a job. Any student growing up with the Bangladeshi education system has experienced the primacy of rote-learning methods, shadow education, and rat races to attain grades and certificates – all with the aim of attaining good jobs and social status.

Then there's the fact that context matters and we should not always blindly implement findings from other contexts into our own, which is something we rarely consider when we think about reforms in our education system. What does this mean for international calls that we have adhered to in terms of training and skills? What about different types of schooling – do they each have different purposes? Can increasing teachers' salaries be the key to improvement in the lessons delivered in classrooms, if we don't simultaneously change our textbooks and our curriculums? What do we mean by "inclusive education"? Are there inequalities in aspirations at the root? Why is it that the child of a minister should not aim for Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET), but the child of a tailor should? What does it say about the pedagogies we have adopted if a child selling fruit can count better than a child in formal education?

In answering these important questions, we must first remember to ask them. Once these questions are raised, how we answer them comes back to purpose and will. At the end of the day, no reform is above the politics and power dynamics that govern the uptake of an idea. And so, the first steps to take would involve three key aspects: budget distribution, investment in research, and carefully selecting the core teams that decide the trajectory of educational policies.

Yes, I agree that the share of the total budget allocated to education should be increased. However, my argument is that how we are using the allotted budget is as important, if not more, than how much budget we have. This is where the matter of educational goals becomes most important. Educational goals will ascertain our priorities, which will in turn drive the educational aspects we choose to invest in. While it is, of course, important to finance educational infrastructure equitably across the country so that each area, regardless of being rural or urban, has sufficient educational provisions – such as school buildings, sanitation, clean drinking water, access to educational materials and resources – it is also important to invest in the "inside" of classrooms, that is, in aspects that are abstract but directly linked to the quality of education. For example, in teacher training, in textbook content, in curriculum.

However, the crucial point is that all these investment decisions must be research-driven. We must invest in educational research to be able to upscale reforms that work particularly for us. And this is where we need to facilitate our educational researchers to gather evidence that can inform our ideas. It is time to rethink our usual practices of picking from research in other contexts and applying it to our own without considering the possibility that things may be different here.

If I were the education minister, I would

specifically focus on substantially increasing the budget allotted to educational research – it should be a unique designated target. We have a terrible scarcity of longitudinal data, and of educational data in general, to be able to follow children from their childhoods in formal education to later years. Reforms should be backed by research and only then will investment decisions gain legitimacy, no matter what the outcome. This is where it becomes important to have institutions in place – to validate the quality of the research that informs policy, and then the effectiveness of the policy itself. No decision should be taken lightly. Each investment decision involves taxpayers' hard-earned money in Bangladesh, and they – the entire nation in fact – deserve transparency.

This brings me to the last point: we need a good team of people in positions of power making the main decisions. The most important criterion is balance. Meaning a good balance of voices that challenge each other. We need people in favour of the human capital theory and people against it. We need both advocates and opposers of school choice. We need balance in terms of people from different portions of society because often there is an underrepresentation of voices, such that one group sets the rules for all others. That is, privileged individuals set the standards for underprivileged groups. Choosing a good team is key, as it makes or breaks the progress we yearn for. Any education minister should first attempt to institutionalise the recruitment process by 1) going by work and not only by fame and political affiliation, and 2) by assuring a balanced representation of voices.

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We need to choose the harder but right path of stimulating each other to reach the decision that best reflects our collective priorities, keeping an eye, especially on the needs of the marginalised populations who need us the most. Each of us must rise above our political beliefs and affiliations to unite for the better of not any political party, but for our Bangladesh, especially for the sake of future generations.

A recent study by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), presented at the BIDS Research Almanac 2023, revealed that there is an acute learning deficiency, whereby around 50 percent of children in Class 3 are unable to read in Bangla at their expected level. It's a finding that should be a national crisis, really. And it's a reminder that education remains in need of our notice and prioritisation. There remain much deeper issues in our education system often silenced and suppressed by attractive numbers and statistics. It's time to begin talking about these openly.

Admittedly, there have been times when I've preferred silence to speaking out. It was at a conference in Dhaka in December that I was apologising to a fellow academic for asking too many questions when a true educator, my teacher Dr Atonu Rabbani, said something along the lines of, "If you don't ask the questions, then I didn't do my job right." That one line, and the way my teacher said it, was an eye-opener to what my responsibilities are. Those of us who are old enough to voice our thoughts should do so. Change starts with us, and it is with the aim of playing my small part in the process that I, with this introductory article, begin my limited series of writings on the changes I would like to make in our education system.



The Rohingya living in the refugee camps of Teknaf and Ukhiya in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh are humans with the right to life, food, water, education, and dignity.

PHOTO: REUTERS