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BRINGING ROHINGYA REFUGEES OFF-TRACK OF LONG-TERM ECONOMIC VULNERABILITY IN BANGLADESH

^{*1}Ferdinand M Joseph, ²Kengatharan Shandralingam

¹Morobe Development Foundation, Unitech Campus Lae, Papua New Guinea, 00411.

²Head of Field Office, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Dahuk, Iraq.

*Corresponding author: josephmoses72@yahoo.co.uk

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ABSTRACT

The ethnic Rohingya is experiencing not only marginalization and statelessness in Myanmar but also facing brutal oppression, violence perpetrated by some in the ethnic majority for many decades. Bangladesh has long been a major Rohingya refugees hosting country and currently, it hosts around 600,000 refugees. Beside recently arrived refugees, there are thousands of refugees, who have been staying in Bangladesh for around three decades as registered or unregistered refugees. Long-term refugees, as per many reports, have been heavily relying on international aid, amid their poor socioeconomic development in Bangladesh. The development of Rohingya refugees is analyzed in this paper from the dimensions of Bangladesh, as a host country; poor human development of Rohingya refugees, and the wider international community. National competition for limited availability of resources and opportunities in Bangladesh; poor human development of Rohingya refugees, make them prolong dependents for refugee handouts. To obtain sustainable development of Rohingya population in Bangladesh, this paper proposes an appeal to international producers to make them financially sound by offering employment opportunities by establishing production plants in Bangladesh. In addition, to avoid hostilities with the local population, equal composition of refugees and the local population is suggested in employee recruitments.

Keywords: Rohingya, Myanmar, Bangladesh, refugees, economic development

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Rohingya is one of the most persecuted and socially excluded ethnic minorities in Myanmar, with no rights of citizenship, lack of access to resources and opportunities, and suffering severe material deprivation (Danish Immigration Service, 2011; European Union, 2017; Equal Rights Trust, 2014; Milton et al., 2017; Myanmar, 2017). They have become the most popular across

the globe, a prominent subject of analysis and critique as well as an unavoidable piece of news in almost all mass-media (Imran, 2014). Rohingya, a Muslim ethnic minority (Danish Immigration Service, 2011; Equal Rights Trust, 2014), are inhabitants of Rakhine, which is a state in Myanmar. Rakhine is situated in the western coast, bordered by Chin state in north, Bay of Bengal in the west, Bangladesh in northwest, and Thailand in south (Chakraborty, n.d.; Myanmar, 2017). The situation of Rakhine state is plagued by historical center-periphery tensions. Severe inter-communal violence between minority Muslim population and others yields extreme poverty and under-development (International Crisis Group, 2014). The land extend of Rakhine state is 36,762 square kilometers. The government of Myanmar and the majority ethnic Buddhists do not recognize them as citizen of Myanmar (Nemoto, n.d.; Ullah, 2011). They consider Rohingya Muslims, a large flock of illegal Bengali migrants, encroached huge swath of land area in the west coast of their country before centuries, do not belong to Myanmar. Kipgen (2014) cited that amid Myanmar's progressive development on many issues, the problem of Rohingya is persisting and largely unaddressed. The Rakhine states consist of majority Buddhist as well as significant Muslim population, which include ethnic Rohingya – the term rejected by the government of Myanmar (International Crisis Group, 2014). Prolong oppression policies by the government of Myanmar on Rohingya minorities deny their citizenship. Myanmar government limits their free movement (Imran, 2014), access to state facilities such as education, health, employment opportunities and forcefully pushed them into great destitution (Danish Immigration Service; Equal Rights Trust, 2014; European Union, 2017; Myanmar, 2017; Ullah, 2011). Kipgen (2014) argued that empirical evidence clearly show that the ethnic Rohingya population is not only marginalized socioeconomically, but also being kept away from Myanmar's wider political arena both locally and nationally.

The majority Rohingya population in Myanmar is confined within their district. They are engaged in conventional agriculture and fisheries, small-scale self-business, labours in construction, and vending. The world has been much more concerned about Rohingya issue since 1992 military crackdown, that paved the way for around 200,000 fled the country towards Bangladesh (Imran, 2014; Nemoto, n.d.; Arfin Khan, Uddin, & Haque, 2012). The 'mixed maritime movement' in 2015, in which, according the report of the UNHCR (2016), 370 persons tragically lost their live in the middle of perilous journey in the sea. They died mostly from starvation, dehydration, disease, and abuse by smugglers.

The latest violence in Myanmar's Rakhine state in 2017, further caused more than 600,000 fled to Bangladesh (UNHCR, 2016; WHO, 2017). The latest report of Inter-Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) in Bangladesh highlights that as of 14 January 2018, there were around 656,000 people registered as newly arrived, coupled with the existing 212,000, yielded a total of around 868,000 Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh (Reliefweb, 2017; UNHCR, 2016). Obviously, the plight of newly arrived refugees is far most heavier than previous ones, due to the untenable situation of (i) Bangladesh, as host country, is economically lower middle income category with growing working age population and higher unemployment rate, (ii) mass influx of Rohingya refugees in a short period of time, (iii) the Rohingya, even in Myanmar, who has long been suffering material deprivation with very lower Human Development Index, and (iv) wider international community in dispatching human, material resources in handling Rohingya refugees crisis, as this decade has become the peak for global refugee crisis in 21st century, affecting millions of population across Asia, Middle East and northern Africa. It is understood from current news of Myanmar, Bangladesh, and the wider world, that there are negotiations ongoing between Bangladesh and Myanmar over the repatriation of newly arrived refugees back to Myanmar gradually, amid mass protestation staged by refugees against it (ISI, 2017). The repatriation would, therefore, take years to complete. The fate of Rohingya refugees in

Bangladesh would be questionable, until they are recognized, socially included officially by Myanmar government, by offering them back citizenship, with full access to their rights, access to resources, and opportunities as others do (Kipgen, 2014). The most worrying concern of the international community and the United Nations is, to bring the refugees off-track of long-term economic vulnerability and make them productive, as it is a vital part of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG). Prolonged refugee status with either economic vulnerability (legal/illegal immigrants engaging in vulnerable employment, earn \leq \$1.90 / day) or dependency on the international aids or host countries' handouts, does not only produce huge chunk of unproductive or very lower productive world's population, but also, from the context of sociology, it excludes them from wider world's society, by denying them freedom of movement, social integration and participation, and access to the resources and opportunities as well as practicing their rights as others do in both their home as well host countries.

As far as the Rohingya refugee population in Bangladesh is concerned, it could be viewed as those, who legally stay as refugees for prolong period (from 2006 or before), those, who stay illegally for prolong period (from 2006 or before), and those immigrated after 2017. This paper primarily analyses the economic situation of Myanmar's ethnic Rohingya population in Bangladesh for a decade or more, as registered, or unregistered refugees (Arfin Khan, Uddin, & Haque, 2012). To ascertain the challenges in bringing Rohingya refugees off-track of long-term economic vulnerability in Bangladesh, perfect narrative of the situation, in the context of the host country, refugees themselves, and the international community, is imperative. Obviously, productivity or dependency of the refugee population would depend on the holistic effort of Bangladesh, Rohingya refugees, and the international community. The situation of Bangladesh, Rohingya refugees, and the international community are discussed in the next sub-sections.

2.0 THE STATUS OF ROHINGYA REFUGEE POPULATION IN BANGLADESH

As far as those, who live as refugees in Bangladesh for two decades are concerned, Milton et al. (2017) noted that their situation is one of the most protracted in the world. Myanmar's Rohingya population in Bangladesh live for more than two decades as registered and unregistered refugees (Farzana, 2016). The majority of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh live either in camps or outside, as extended families and each family consists of three to fourteen individuals (Arfin Khan, Uddin, & Haque, 2012). As mentioned above, Rohingya refugee population in Bangladesh, like their country of origin, is the least developed population with lower Human Development Index, that means very low literacy rate (Danish Immigration Service, 2011), or no formal education (Arfin Khan, Uddin, & Haque, 2012), material deprivation, low life expectancy and lack of access to resources, services, and opportunities (Massom, 2016). The refugees already have experienced numerous ethnic violence, internal displacements, and its consequences, especially multidimensional poverty in Myanmar (Danish Immigration Service, 2011; Farzana, 2016; Ullah, 2011). In Bangladesh, not only the first-generation migrants, second-generation migrants are also least developed, with very limited education and living standards. Because of these, the impacts of all efforts, made by the international community to encourage them towards upward socioeconomic mobilization are very limited.

Imran (2014, p. 15) highlighted that the 'Rohingya refugees are critically desperate to earn a living for their very survival, they would quote a much lower fee or salary for any job offered to them and this, incidentally, has seriously upset the wage pattern in the labour market of the

host country'. In Bangladesh, the majority of unregistered Rohingya refugee population turned themselves as 'illegal migrants', has become a cheap labour source, engaging clandestine jobs in the informal labour market (Chakraborty, n.d.; Danish Immigration Service, 2011; Ullah, 2011), and thereby, preferred by local employers. Absorbing cheap refugee labour force than local labour force into service sector in a competitive labour market, coupled by severe competition in between refugee and local population for existing resources (Farzana, 2016), exacerbates tensions with local communities and creates anti-Rohingya rhetoric and xenophobia incited by local Anti-Rohingya communities, which seriously increases their vulnerability. In some instances, lack of access to the job market, push the refugees to engage in various crimes (Imran, 2014), such as drug, arms, smuggling, illegal felling, hunting, deforestation and even some of them are very easily trapped by extremist ideologies. It has been noted that although some registered refugees manage to engage some livelihood activities either legally or illegally, such as firewood collection, small-scale gardening in their encroached land, rickshaw pulling, engaging in small business, fishing and construction labours, considerable portion of refugee population still depends on rations and other aids and begging (Arfin Khan, Uddin, & Haque, 2012; Ullah, 2011; Farzana, 2016). From gender dimension, unlike men, women are confined to their homes, engaging in their routine childcare, cooking, etcetera (Ullah, 2011). Due to their financial vulnerability, some are engaged in sex trade and others are engaged in lower-wage employment.

3.0 BANGLADESH AS HOST COUNTRY

Bangladesh has long been a preferred destination country of Rohingya refugees, due to the ethnolinguistic similarity and its proximity to Rakhine state of Myanmar (Danish Immigration Service, 2011; Milton et al., 2017; WFP, 2012). As far as those, who live in Bangladesh for decades, WFP (2012) the situation of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is the most protracted in the world. The socio-economic landscape of Bangladesh primarily determines the country's ability to host, treat, integrate, and share their resources and opportunities with refugee population. Bangladesh is categorized by the United Nations as the lower middle-income country (World Bank, 2018), with the population around 170 million (Imran, 2014; World Bank, n.d.). It is one of the populous countries, next to India, China, Pakistan, and Indonesia in Asia. The Human Development Index of Bangladesh is well below the Asian average, means, large chunk of its own population is still struggling with lack of literacy, income, and life expectancy. Its current working-age population percentage is around 70% and continue to grow over the coming years with the unemployment rate is around 4.5% and age dependency ratio (of 16-64 years) is around 50% (Danish Immigration Service, 2011; World Bank, n.d.). In general, although the country demonstrates progressive economic development in recent years (Rohingya crisis growing, 2018), it still has to focus more on its own population. Bangladesh refugee policies, coupled with the current economic scenario, do not allow refugee population in engaging employment activities, prevents the country to share its resources and opportunities with outsiders (Danish Immigration Service, 2011; Milton et al, 2017). Most vitally, Bangladesh is concerned about its national security and fears uncontrollable Rohingya population would impact it negatively (Imran, 2014; Farzana, 2016). From sociological context, as Rohingya refugees are ethnic Bengalese in nature, possess ethnolinguistic, and religious similarity with majority Bangladesh population (Milton et al., 2017). Bangladesh has therefore been very cautious in granting the Rohingya, freedom of movement, because, it fears to offer them the right to move freely, would cause unforced merging of Rohingya population with their mainstream societies, in other words, 'unforced assimilation', a devastating strain to

Bangladesh. It is important to note that all Rohingya refugee population are landless in Bangladesh, cannot engage in agricultural activities and are denied accessing fishing activities or other labour markets (Arfin Khan, Uddin, & Haque, 2012).

Further, Bangladesh is not a signatory of the United Nations (1951) Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol (Imran, 2014; Phiri, n.d.), and therefore, is not obliged to integrate refugee population in the mainstream society and look after them. In addition, Bangladesh does not have a clear refugee policy and therefore, refugee integration is extremely challengeable (Milton et al., 2017). Although the country has, historically and culturally, been hitched with Rohingya ethnic minority in Myanmar, they are deeply divided by the concept of 'nationalism'. Bangladesh tend to view them as 'foreign Burmese', rather than 'ethnic Bengalis', thus, with less hospitality (Chakraborty, n.d.; Ullah, 2011; Farzana, 2016), restricts the refugee population's access to resources and opportunities, and practicing their rights and all these measures push them into the nature of social exclusion. This has prompted most of refugee population to live illegally outside the refugee camps, without any registration. Bangladesh recognized only 25,000-33,000 Rohingya as officially registered, although there were around 200,000 refugees were residing illegally outside the camps (Danish Immigration Service, 2011; UNHCR, 2016). In addition, several reports of the United Nations states that several applications submitted by them regarding the identification of illegally staying Myanmar refugees in Bangladesh for prolong period as well as applications for the development of Cox Bazar district have not been considered by the government of Bangladesh favourably.

4.0 THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AS INGOS, UN, AND DONORS

Farzana (2016) noted that with the approval of the government of Bangladesh, various humanitarian organizations along with the United Nations, have been working for the improvement of livelihood of refugees and also to make them self-reliance. However, large portion of Rohingya refugees view Bangladesh, a place of temporary residence in the hope of returning to their own country of origin (Ullah, 2011), while some view Bangladesh, not as the first country of asylum, instead, a transit country in the hope of moving further to a third country (Farzana, 2016), preferably Malaysia, Thailand, Australia, or New Zealand. The refugees of both cases are somehow reluctant in investing their time in meaningful livelihood empowering programmes, implemented by INGOs or the UN.

The standard of the refugee population, coupled with Bangladesh government's policies towards refugees, determine the capacity, scale, scope of livelihood programmes to be implemented by international/national partners in building their human capital. Rohingya refugees with a very limited capacity of education and other skills, decrease the likelihood of connecting them with higher potential labour markets, which require advanced education with high skills. Even though young refugee population is made with some skills by vocational training programmes, finding out the existence of suitable job opportunities in Bangladesh job market, not only make them difficult but also creates hostile nature with local population due to the competitive labour market.

Reliefweb (2017) accentuated the importance of humanitarian aid to vulnerable refugee population for them to meet the basic needs. The report further noted that at present, the international community, especially humanitarian donors enthusiastically pledge their commitment to support Refugee population. However, funding from the international community for empowering refugee population via livelihood enhancement may be hindered in the long term by current global refugee crisis. From 2010, the international community has

been forced to focus on refugee emergencies in the Middle East, northern Africa (MENA), Europe and latest influx of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar. Large sums of financial and other liquid assets are now being dispatched towards millions of refugees and IDP population in war-torn regions, notably for the recent influx of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, caused a severe shortfall in funding for livelihood empowering programmes for long-term Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. In addition to this, Phiri (n.d.) noted that offering long-term assistance for refugees without progress and attainment of self-reliance would undermine human dignity, as well as the principle of refugee protection.

5.0 THE POSSIBILITY OF ENGAGING LOCAL POPULATION AND ROHINGYA REFUGEES WITH MULTI-NATIONAL PRODUCERS IN BANGLADESH

Legrain (2017) explained how various governments, NGOs, and businesses numerous opportunities to get refugee population into jobs. Now, the international community has realized the importance of engaging refugees into global workforce not only to make them productive but also to fast-track their integration with the local population and to increase their ability to participate full social life in host countries. As we all are aware, in the path of global effort to make refugees productive, a new history has been written down recently in Jordan, by a joint initiation of the government of Jordan and IKEA, a Swedish producer, which allows the establishment of IKEA's production plants in Jordan with the intention of employing 200,000 Syrian refugees as well as Jordanian nationals in equal composition in the production of woven items including rugs, cushions and bedspreads (Dezeen, 2017). At present, IKEA is assisting in Bangladesh, over 10,000 refugee children granted access to education and over 3,100 refugees receiving vocational training (UNHCR, 2018). For an example, Huang (2018) stressed that Bangladesh could expand its trade opportunities with Europe and China by offering increased opportunities for migrant workers. She further noted that refugees can be changed as economic contributors with supportive policies and investments. Like IKEA, many multinational corporate institutions may be interested in offering a helping hand for long-term Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh with the association of Bangladesh's social entrepreneurs to tackle socioeconomic hardships of both refugees as well as Bangladesh, and reduce aid-based interventions, which make refugees long-term economic vulnerability, while making them more productive. The ultimate decision on allowing them in Bangladesh is on the hand of the government of Bangladesh.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This article attempts to narrate the abject tragedy of ethnic Rohingya population in Myanmar and their agonies. Countless evidences show that they are oppressed in Myanmar and, they have been neglected in host countries, when it comes to development. Rohingya is one of the most protracted refugee populations in Bangladesh. They have long been relying on handouts offered by international aid agencies. Bringing them off-track of long term economic dependency and economic vulnerability is challengeable. This paper argues that there are three dimensions, from which, their situation can be analysed. Firstly, Bangladesh, as a host country, cannot look after the Rohingya refugee population and share their resources with them for very long period. Secondly, Rohingya refugee population themselves are very least developed, with very lower human development index. Therefore, making them high quality is unlikely. Thirdly, the international community is forced to spend much of their resources for newly arrived Rohingya refugee population in Bangladesh. Further, Middle-East, Africa refugee

situation have made the international aid agencies, more vulnerable in securing more funds for protracted refugee population like Rohingya in Bangladesh. This paper, therefore, appeals international tradesmen, multinational corporate companies to assist Rohingya refugees as well as local Bangladeshi population in Bangladesh by offering them job opportunities by establishing their production plants in Bangladesh. Moreover, this paper intends to appreciate fellow researchers and academics to test the feasibilities of the proposed idea.

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