

Evaluation Brief



Joint UNHCR/WFP Impact Evaluation of Food Assistance to Refugees in Protracted Situations in Bangladesh

Context

The Rohingya refugee situation in Bangladesh is one of the most protracted in the world, with more than twenty years of continuous camp settlements. Of the estimated presence of over 200,000 Rohingya in Bangladesh, only approximately 24,000 are officially recognised as refugees by the Government of Bangladesh. These refugees live in two official camps, Kutupalong and Nayapara, while the remaining Rohingya population has settled in host communities in Cox's Bazar District and also in two sites in proximity to the official camps.

WFP and UNHCR assistance

WFP and UNHCR have been assisting the current population of registered refugees in Bangladesh since 1992. WFP provides food assistance to approximately 24,000 registered refugees and is responsible for provision of basic food commodities, in addition to school feeding with fortified biscuits, and the provision of supplementary foods to targeted groups. Food distribution is carried out by the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society. Planning and distribution of food assistance is jointly done with government actors. UNHCR provides non-food items, shelter, health services, potable water supply, sanitation, primary education, vocational training and other basic services.

Objectives and Evaluation Questions

The goal of the evaluation was to assess the role and contribution of food assistance to self-reliance and durable solutions of the affected refugee populations. The main objectives of the evaluation were:

- to evaluate the outcomes and impact of food assistance interventions within the protracted Rohingya refugee settlements of Bangladesh; and
- to identify changes needed to improve the food assistance interventions such that they contribute to the attainment of self-reliance and/or durable solutions for the Rohingya refugee populations.

Key Findings

The evaluation findings are organized according to the four key areas of focus: livelihoods and coping strategies, movement, protection and the protective environment, and food security and nutrition.

Livelihoods and coping strategies

The evaluation assessed the impact of food assistance on livelihoods and coping strategies and found that all Rohingya, independently of refugee status, are economically active to some extent. Food assistance and other external interventions did not reduce the need for registered refugees to seek supplementary additional income and unregistered Rohingya, without assistance, needed to work to meet their basic needs. This is despite the legal restrictions, and implications thereof, on doing so for both groups.

The evaluation concludes that food assistance was a contributing factor, along with other forms of external assistance, in the choice of economic activity and the adoption of specific coping strategies. Registered refugees had overall significantly different economic activities in which they were engaged, including higher skilled and less risky employment for an overall higher wage rate than their unregistered Rohingya counterparts. They also had significantly better wealth status based on asset accumulation. Food assistance was an integral component to their livelihoods, used primarily for consumption, as collateral and as a value transfer to pay loans and mortgages. Due to the value transfer of all external assistance in the camps, refugees were able to work less and rely on this external assistance to cope in times of crisis.

Despite these differences, all refugee and unregistered Rohingya groups were reliant on economic activity outside the household to support their livelihoods. Unregistered Rohingya employed a greater range of coping mechanisms (both positive and negative) and were a significant part of the labour market in the region.

Movements

Despite restrictions on movements, all refugees and unregistered Rohingya were found to be highly mobile, not only within the local communities and camp proximities, but also within Cox's Bazar district as well as other areas of Bangladesh. These movements were closely linked to their search for income opportunities. The evaluation however found key differences in movements between unregistered Rohingya and registered refugees.

Overall, there was a tendency for unregistered Rohingya to travel further than registered refugees. The evaluation evidence pointed to the search for economic employment as the main driving factor and that external assistance (including food assistance) mitigated the necessity of this for registered refugees, thereby reducing their movement away from the camps. The evaluation also found that unregistered Rohingya feel safer, and reportedly can earn more, if they move further away from the camps and makeshift sites; thus there is a pull factor away from the insecurity of the local areas and to where employment opportunities are better.

Protection and the protective environment

The evaluation found that protection concerns were a key problem for all Rohingya groups and had an effect upon refugee movement, livelihoods and coping strategies. However, the evidence demonstrated that unregistered Rohingya were more vulnerable than refugees because they lacked legal status and relevant documentation. This distinction, while significant, was muted by the prevalence of refugees economically active and moving outside the camps, neither of which is legally permitted.

The evaluation found evidence of a widespread informal system of protection in place, with various patronage and non-patronage networks operating throughout the Cox's

Bazar district and forming the core protective environment for the majority of refugee (when outside the camps) and unregistered Rohingya. These networks were comprised of local elites, community leaders, imams, and local authorities. The evaluation found repeated instances of payment-for-access arrangements, allowing refugee and unregistered Rohingya access to transportation, jobs, natural resources, etc. Not all of these arrangements were perceived to be negative or exploitative; the evaluation found evidence that unregistered Rohingya living in local villages are often warned by local leaders and imams when authorities were near.

The evaluation found that food assistance was a secondary contributing factor to the perception of insecurity and vulnerability for refugees. Food assistance and other external assistance contributed to the greater wealth status of refugees and thereby to widespread negative resentment from those not receiving entitlements.

Food security and nutrition

The evaluation findings on food security revealed that registered refugees can diversify their diet significantly more than unregistered Rohingya living in the Kutapalong makeshift or Leda sites. Food assistance was a direct contribution to this, due to the rations which could be sold, shared or exchanged. The value transfer of a ration was found to be important in this respect and in the taking of loans. In addition, the analysis revealed the HDDS of registered refugees was not dependent on an income stream (and thus they could absorb shocks, changes in the labour market, etc.), whereas that of unregistered Rohingya was obviously directly dependent on their economic activity. It must be noted that across all groups (including the local Bangladeshi populations of Cox's Bazar district) covered by the evaluation, HDD scores were within a narrow range, reflecting the generally high levels of poverty and food insecurity across the district.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall Assessment

The evaluation found several significant differences between registered refugee households that receive food assistance and unregistered Rohingya households that do not. Food assistance contributed to these factors through its impact on the economic activity of the recipient households.

When compared to unregistered Rohingya groups in makeshift sites, there was evidence that food assistance contributed to short term outcomes primarily in the form of improved dietary diversity and reduced frequency of negative coping strategies for the refugees. However, there were indications that these positive impacts disappear when the refugee groups were compared to the unregistered Rohingya living within the Bangladeshi host communities.

The evaluation evidence empirically pointed to the search for income opportunities as the main driving factor behind differences between Rohingya groups and that external assistance (including food assistance) slightly mitigated the necessity of this for registered refugees, thereby reducing their movement away from the camps. Unregistered Rohingya were found to have a pattern of greater mobility as their search for income generating opportunities meant they spent less time in the vicinity of Cox's Bazar district and moved more frequently into other parts of Bangladesh. There were indications that registered refugees have become dependent on camp assistance and this safety net mitigated their search for livelihood opportunities elsewhere.

The evaluation found that food assistance was a secondary contributing factor to the perception of insecurity and vulnerability for refugees. Food assistance and other external assistance contributed to the greater wealth status of refugees and thereby to widespread negative resentment from those not receiving entitlements. However, protection was a significant concern for all Rohingya groups and protection provided by refugee status was muted by the prevalence of refugees economically active and moving outside the camps, neither of which is legally permitted.

The evaluation found that external factors, primarily restrictions on unregistered Rohingya stemming from their lack of legal status, and the widespread poverty and low levels of socio-economic development in Cox's Bazar District were very important factors affecting the potential for self-reliance of Rohingya households. Food assistance was found to be a contributing factor to short term outcomes for recipient households but its provision within a package of external assistance over a long period of time and to a select group of households created dependency for these households.

Recommendations

Based on the evaluation findings and conclusions, four recommendations are directed to key stakeholders.

1. Develop a transition strategy to provide unregistered Rohingya in Cox's Bazar with temporary status and recognition, pending durable solutions in Myanmar, that ensures them protection and opportunities to contribute to the economy and to access basic services.
2. Jointly develop an alternative strategy for current food assistance and introduce options that continue to target (a) registered refugees and (b) increasingly, the most food insecure unregistered Rohingya and local population groups in Cox's Bazar.
3. Identify strategies to ensure that all vulnerable Rohingya and Bangladeshi populations in Cox's Bazar are targeted through support interventions including health, education and preventative nutrition services.
4. Within the framework of a transition strategy and alternative food assistance options, develop strategies to gradually reduce the large concentrations of refugees in camps and unregistered refugees in Kutapalong makeshift and Leda sites in order mitigate conflict over natural resources and the significant protection problems concentrated at these locations.



Full and summary reports of the evaluation and the Management Response are available at www.wfp.org/evaluation.

For more information please contact the Office of Evaluation WFP.evaluation@WFP.org.