



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



Deconstructing the nexus between the influx of Rohingya refugees and the economy (Labor) in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

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Abstract

Over the past decade, refugee crises have dominated the headlines of social media on a daily basis. Millions of individuals have left their homes in pursuit of safety and a promising future. Examples like the Syrian civil conflict and the Rohingya exodus to Bangladesh stand out, and the number of such instances is exponentially increasing around the world. The latest addition to this crisis is the Ukraine-Russia war (February 2022), which has already displaced 14 million Ukrainian people. Different countries have hosted a large number of refugees, but this often brings about a very negative impact on the host communities. Various socio-economic and political crises arise due to the influx of refugees.

This study focuses on the Rohingya refugees who have fled from Myanmar to Bangladesh. Given their influx to Bangladesh, a developing and overcrowded country, the host community faces innumerable problems. In addition, this study explores other aspects especially, the labor market. Rohingya refugees receive support from donor organizations. Therefore, there is a question to ask. How do the refugees influence the economy of the host country? This study aims to find answers to this unexplored question. After the arrival of the Rohingya, this labor market has shrunk for local Bangladeshi women in the study area. The majority of impoverished women work roughly 3/4 of an hour in a particular household. Their daily earnings are less than \$1 while they work on domestic chores. Thousands of national and foreign staff live in those areas that have brought a dramatic change in housing patterns. The influx of refugees also led to a decrease in wages and employment prospects for another segment of the Bangladeshi population, identified as the economically disadvantaged group.

Keywords: Rohingya; Refugees; Labor market; Economy; Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Human beings are facing the worst humanitarian crisis in the modern age. Wars, communal conflict, and political clashes have turned millions of people into refugees. By the end of 2017, over 68.5 million people – equating to approximately one in every 110 people worldwide – had experienced displacement due to factors such as violent conflict, persecution, famine, or natural catastrophes (1). Over the last decade, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) has surged significantly, reaching a juncture where more than two-thirds of all displaced individuals remain in the home country because they do not have the economic means to travel outside the country (2).

The remaining one-third of displaced people cross international borders and become refugees. The bulk of the refugees come from five countries grappling with conflict including Afghanistan, Syria, South Sudan, Somalia, and Myanmar, and currently, both refugees and internally displaced populations have reached unprecedented levels, surpassing records set in the post-World War II era (3).

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According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (1), “Refugees are people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country”. The 1951 Convention and Protocol states that, “a refugee is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (1).

Refugees who cross international borders often face many challenges. Upon resettlement in a foreign country, the refugees must find ways to effectively integrate into the culture and society of the host nation (4). The process of integration could be significantly hampered by the traumatic events the refugees experienced in the home country (5). They might resemble a newborn in the socialization process (6), navigating challenges stemming from cultural mismatch and unfamiliar linguistic surroundings (5). They also face other challenges such as getting work permits because some of the host countries do not allow refugees to legally work. Integration is a multifaceted concept in the realm of refugee resettlement, encompassing diverse interpretations and various associated models (4). Certain scholars delineate integration as a tangible outcome amenable to objective assessment through established benchmarks (7, 8, 9). In contrast, others contend that integration embodies an ongoing intercultural interaction between refugee groups and the native population of the host society (10, 11, 12).

Despite the challenges of integration and the lack of work permits, most of the refugees participate illegally in the labor force. The issue of refugees and their impact on the national economy is complex and debated. While there are concerns about their status, it's important to note that refugees can still make significant contributions to the economy in various ways, especially through their participation in the labor force, consumer spending, entrepreneurship, and fostering economic growth. From an economic perspective, the arrival of refugees can be likened to a substantial increase in labor supply within a local market, which can be considered a supply-side shock (13). The introduction of a substantial refugee population might strain local administrative and financial capabilities and foster social unease, particularly when refugees settle in underprivileged and underserved regions of developing nations (13). Conversely, a mathematical model utilizing three decades' worth of data from 15 Western European countries proposes that migrants and asylum seekers don't weigh down national economies but instead contribute positively to them (14).

Bangladesh is not immune from the challenges of hosting a large number of refugees. According to the World Bank (2023), the population density of Bangladesh is 1,286 people/square mile in 2020, which is remarkably high in comparison with most of the countries in the world (15). Unfortunately, being a developing and highly populated country, Bangladesh hosts an estimated one million refugees who fled from the neighboring country, Myanmar. This study focuses on Rohingya refugees and their influx into Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. They are acknowledged as one of the world's most persecuted ethnic communities (16). As a predominantly Muslim community in Myanmar, a country with a Buddhist majority, the Rohingya have been a historically marginalized and persecuted group, facing discrimination, violence, and human rights abuses. By their own government, the Rohingya have been brutalized (17). Given the significant influx of mass refugees to foreign countries, conducting research on these matters has gained importance within the context of the contemporary world. In essence, the aim of this research is to examine Rohingya refugees and their linkage to the economy in Bangladesh, discover the real situation in Cox's Bazar, and prescribe ameliorative policies in the settlement camps. Specifically, the following research question is addressed: How do Rohingya refugees influence the economy (labor market) of Cox's Bazar?

1.1. Study area

Rohingya refugee camps have been built in the southernmost district of Bangladesh, Cox's Bazar. This research is Cox's Bazar oriented and all the information has been collected from this district. This part provides an overview of Bangladesh, focusing specifically on Cox's Bazar. The regions of Ukhia and Teknaf exhibit a diversity of geographical types, including flat, hilly, coastal, forested, and wetland, all contained within a limited space. Despite covering 41% of the area, woods are rapidly disappearing as a result of numerous anthropogenic and natural events. In this area, Bengalis, Rakhaines, Chakmas, and Rohingyas coexist (18). Due to incursions, these forests have either deteriorated or are now being cleaned up over the last 20 years. Between 1989 and 2009, the forest cover of the Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary (TWS) decreased by 46%, from 3,304 hectares to 1,794 hectares. The area covered by shrub forests has expanded by 25%, from 6,263 ha to 7,824 ha. The loss of a large amount of land cover vegetation and hill cutting can cause soil erosion, sedimentation, siltation, and landslides. These effects will be particularly noticeable during the rainy season.

1.2. Geographic Location of Bangladesh

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. The area and population size of this country are 147,570 sq. km (19) and 179, 329, 138 (20) respectively. Bangladesh's geographic coordinates range from approximately 20°34'N to 26°38'N latitude and from 88°01'E to 92°41'E longitude. It shares borders with Indian states in the west, north, and east, and with Myanmar to the south. The total land border is about 4,246 km, with 93.9% shared with India and 6.1% with Myanmar. The southern border is the Bay of Bengal, featuring a coastline of 580 km. Bangladesh's territorial waters extend up to 12 nautical miles, and its economic zone reaches 200 nautical miles from the baselines (19). There is a total of 405 rivers with 230 tributaries and distributaries, Bangladesh is a densely populated, and riverine country and three rivers (Sangu, Matamuhuri, and Naf) enter Bangladesh from Myanmar, whereas the remaining 54 of the country's 57 transboundary rivers originate in India (21).

1.3. Geographic Location of Cox's Bazar

The Cox's Bazar District covers an expanse of 2491.86 sq km, positioned between 20°43' and 21°56' north latitudes and 91°50' to 92°23' east longitudes. It is bordered by Chittagong district to the north, the Bay of Bengal to the south, Bandarban district, Arakan (Myanmar), and the Naf River to the east, with the Bay of Bengal marking its western boundary. Remarkably, Cox's Bazar boasts the world's longest sea beach (22). This study has intentionally chosen two among the eight sub-districts in Cox's Bazar: Ukhiya and Teknaf. These particular sub-districts host both registered and unregistered camps created for Rohingya refugees. Table 1 provides a comparative overview of these two sub-districts.

Table 1 Administrative Structure of Cox's Bazar

Sub-districts of Cox's Bazar	Number of Unions
Cox's Bazar Sadar	10
Chakaria	18
Pekua	7
Kutubdia	6
Moheshkhali	8
Ramu	11
Ukhiya	5
Teknaf	6

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2011 (23)

As Rohingya refugee camps have been established in Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts, brief overviews of these two sub-districts are provided in Table 2.

Table 2 Overview of Ukhiya and Teknaf Subdistricts

Key Indicators	District	Sub- Districts	
	Cox's Bazar	Ukhiya	Teknaf
Area	2491.85 Sq. Km.	261.80 Sq. Km	388.66 Sq. Km
Density	919/ Sq. Km.	792/ Sq. Km	680/ Sq. Km.
Urbanization	21.79%	13.17%	19.46%
Population	2,289,990	207,379	264,389
Household	415,954	37940	46,328

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2011 (23)

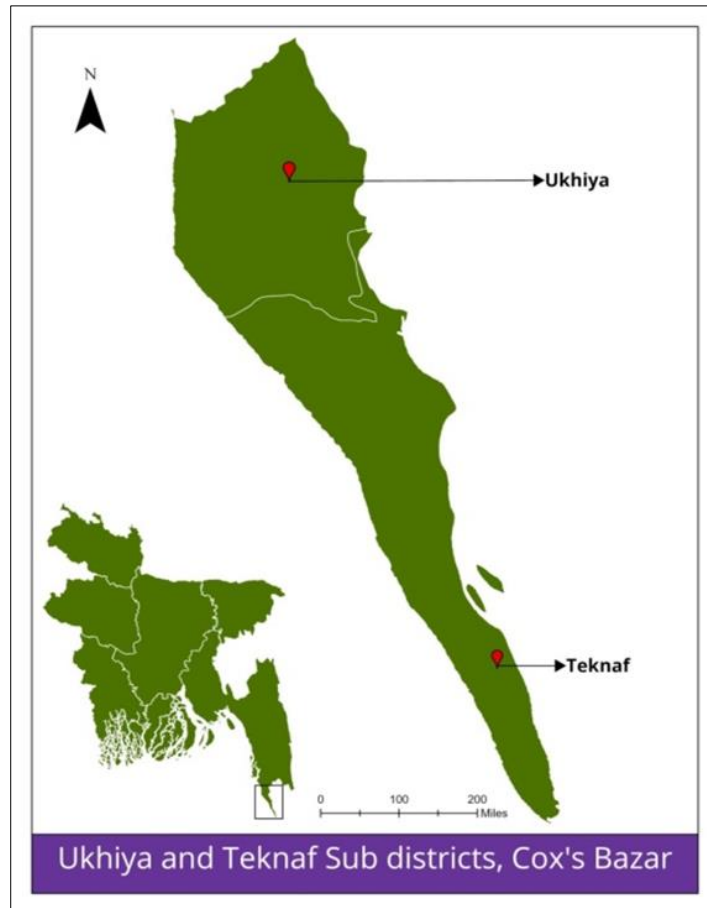


Figure 1 Map of the Study Area

2. Methodology

2.1. Sampling Techniques and Participants

Purposive sampling technique in qualitative research is so important that it brings out the best viewpoints from the participants (24). The study of human subjects is very complex and dynamic, and requires interview of participants with direct knowledge of the refugees. Therefore, this study selected group of knowledgeable and experienced persons to be interviewed for the research. The selected key interviewees (shown in Table 3) are as follows-

Table 3 Key Interviewees

SL. No.	Designation	Number of participants
1.	Majhi	3
2.	Rohingya young volunteers (Male)	5
3.	Rohingya young volunteers (Female)	2
4.	Staffs working in NGOs (Host)	5
5.	Host community leader	2
6.	Local people (educated)	5

Majhi is known as the representative of Rohingya community who lead the different blocks or areas in the Camps.

2.2. Data Collection Sources and Methods

In order to collect data, two sources have been used: 1. Primary data; and 2. Secondary data. As for the primary data, we communicated with 22 people with direct knowledge of Rohingya refugees. The people were divided into two groups: Rohingya Respondents and Local Respondents. The Rohingya Respondents have direct contact with the refugees in the refugee camps, whereas Local Respondents have business interaction with the refugees outside the refugee camps. Each group responded to similar interview questions. The interview questions were divided into three parts: 1. Means of support; 2. Payment types and amount; and 3. Interaction method.

The people were interviewed individually over the phone between February and May in 2023. These interviews can be considered as the best source of narratives about the Rohingya people. The narratives helped us to understand the socioeconomic situation. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using descriptive narratives to elucidate the status of Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar.

Secondary data has been collected from different websites, articles, books, and newspapers. Some websites are remarkable, especially the official websites of UNHCR, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Meanwhile, a very good number of researchers have conducted research on Rohingya refugees which has given me additional support for the data collection. Those data incorporate different official websites, articles from journals and online news portals, and thesis which have been used as secondary data. The list of all secondary data sources has been attached in the reference part.

3. Results and discussion

Interview questions focused on the economic impact of the Rohingya refugee influx on Bangladesh. It aimed to investigate the available employment and income opportunities for both locals and the Rohingya refugees, the factors influencing wage determination, the effect of these wages on the local populace, and the identification of specific groups within the local community who experienced either positive or negative impacts due to the presence of refugees.

3.1. Labor Market in Cox's Bazar (Ukhiya-Teknaf)

Rohingya respondents and local respondents, answering part one interviews, provided a great deal of insights into the labor market of Cox's Bazar, including its background, opportunities, and various employment types. Based on the interviews, the research identified two major work patterns of Hosts living in Ukhiya-Teknaf sub districts of Cox's Bazar.

- Host communities with high contact with the Rohingya
- Host communities with low contact with the Rohingya

The first host community is comparatively affluent and entrepreneurial in occupations such as fisheries, land owners, rickshaw owners, to mention a few. As the result, the hosts or employers are able to hire laborers including Rohingya. Through business contacts, the hosts tend to have a lot of interactions and dealings with the Rohingya refugees.

The second host community lives in the surrounding areas of Refugee camps and has low to very little contact with the Rohingya. They are not affluent and do not have the means to hire laborers. As a result, there are limited or zero contacts between the host community and Rohingya refugees.

The Rohingya refugees themselves while admitting to their lack of or low level of education, they identified with employment opportunities such as serving as paid volunteers in NGOs, working as laborers within the host community, and some engaging in rickshaw driving. Despite the recognition that working outside the camps is deemed illegal, they noted a general lack of enforcement or concern regarding this matter.

3.2. Payment System, Discrimination, and Working Contract

The Rohingya and local respondents provided information on the compensation structure between business owners and refugees. When questioned about the payment system, potential working discrimination, and contractual arrangements, the respondents indicated that all payments are made in cash, lacking any official payment structure. Due to the refugees' illegal employment status, they expressed an inability to negotiate or contest payment terms with the host population. Notably, they highlighted a disparity in remuneration compared to local Bangladeshi laborers; while locals receive 1000 BDT (\$10 USD) per day, Rohingya laborers reported earning around 600-700 BDT (\$6-7 USD) daily. This discrepancy was attributed to their undocumented status, perceived as a form of discrimination. Additionally, they mentioned the absence of written agreements or contracts specifying working days and payment terms.

The local respondents in particular, asserted that the willingness of Rohingya refugees to accept lower wages has created challenges for local laborers, leading to a decrease in demand for their services. The practice of offering work at reduced rates has had a substantial impact on the income of the local population, particularly those with lower earnings. All the interview respondents agreed that certain Bangladeshi individuals economically benefited from the Rohingya influx. On the other hand, the influx of refugees also led to a decrease in wages and employment prospects for another segment of the Bangladeshi population, identified as the economically disadvantaged group.

3.3. Economically Benefitted Group due to Rohingya Influx

The local respondents continued to provide feedback which helped this research to identify groups that have directly benefitted from the influx of Rohingya. The beneficiaries have been classified into five categories shown as follows in Figure 2.

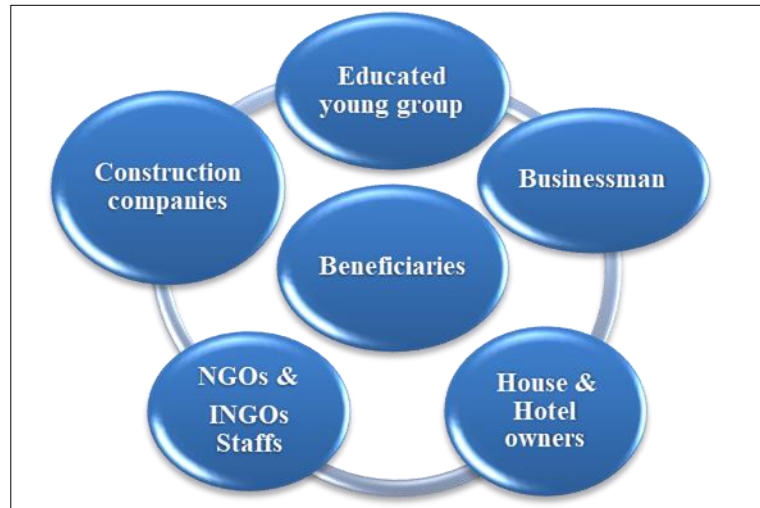


Figure 1 Economically Benefitted Group due to Rohingya Influx

Traditionally, Bangladesh has a high unemployment rate among young people. However, the Local respondents have given insights behind decreasing unemployment rates among young people. The influx of Rohingya opened up thousands job opportunities for Bangladeshi people. At present, many local youths are working in national and international organizations such as UNHCR, WHO, IOM, WFP, MSF etc. One of the local respondents shared that-

“My son just completed bachelor’s from a normal college. You know how hard it is to get a good job graduating from a college. Most of the good companies hired employees from university. In this case, my son is now working in a NGO and earning around \$400 (40,000 Taka) every month which is now a blessing for my family”. Local construction companies are identified as economically beneficiary group. The companies are responsible for building such a giant camp for the refugees. The construction projects are generally lucrative and spur other economic benefits in the vicinity and beyond.

According to the interview respondents, the arrival of Rohingya refugees and support groups such as nongovernment organizations brought employment opportunities for the residents. 144 international and local NGOs have established offices in Cox’s Bazar town, Ukhiya, and Teknaf. Along the 56-kilometre stretch from Cox’s Bazar town to the Upazilas of Ukhiya and Teknaf, there are abundant signs, tents, warehouses, and flags representing various NGOs (25).

“The NGO Affairs Bureau, which controls the humanitarian programs in Cox’s Bazar, and releases foreign funds, said the NGOs have Tk815 crore funding to run humanitarian programs in the district. The NGOs are using the donor funds in nine areas critical for the survival of the Rohingya people, especially for providing shelter and food. More funds are in the pipeline, sources at the NGO Affairs Bureau said” (26). This huge number of support staff could not be possible without the arrival of Rohingya.

According to the respondents, when the influx of refugees began, there were inadequate housing facilities available in the area to accommodate the large number of refugees and newly employed NGO staff. Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts are primarily rural areas, lacking sufficient housing in 2017. Initially, all foreign staff from various INGOs resided in hotels situated in Cox’s Bazar main town, providing an economic boom to the hotel owners.

As the refugee crisis continued, NGOs started moving from Cox’s Bazar city to Ukhiya-Teknaf sub-districts which are their working station. Moving to Ukhiya and Teknaf created a good demand for housing in those areas. Affluent local Bangladeshi with surplus housing rented their properties and earned income by doing so in the region. At present, thousands of national and foreign staff live in those areas that have brought a dramatic change in housing pattern. This rapid transformation has proven advantageous for both local homeowners and hotel proprietors.

3.4. Economically Disadvantaged Group Due to Rohingya Influx

Unfortunately, not every group benefitted from the influx of refugees, and this section discusses the host communities impacted by the huge influx of refugees. Livelihood opportunities have been reduced in several ways for them. Local respondents expressed their concern saying that-

“Some Rohingya refugees have initiated competitive businesses in the local area, selling items acquired from donations at affordable prices. This has impacted local retailers. Moreover, they employ inexpensive labor from the host community, reducing the demand for local laborers”. The respondents have provided insights into the specific groups negatively impacted. They are broadly categorized into four main groups shown as follows in Figure 3.

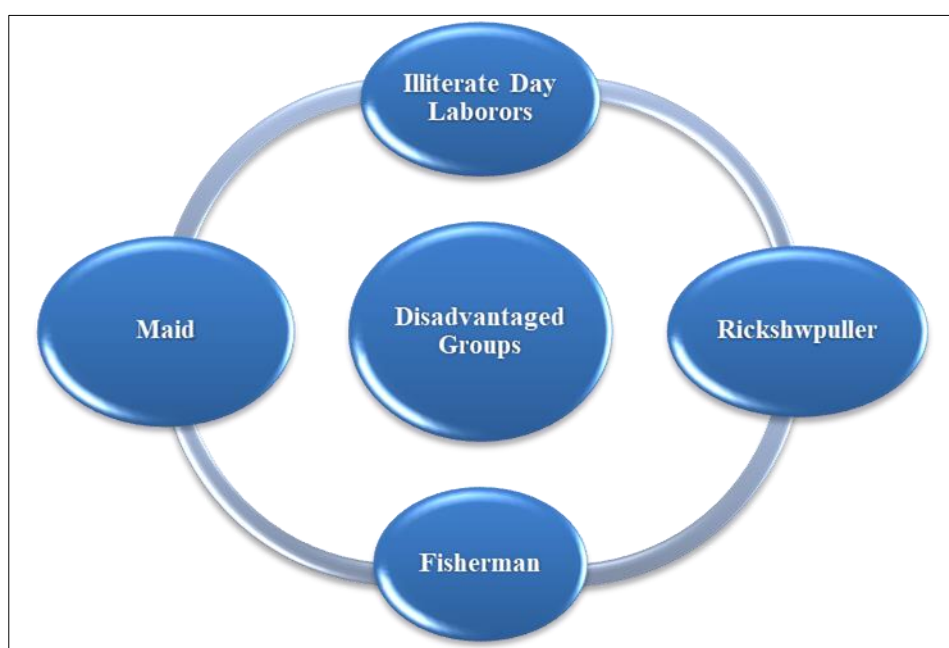


Figure 2 Economically Disadvantaged Group due to Rohingya Influx

Local day laborers are the most disadvantaged or suffering group of people after the arrival of Rohingya. Many reasons have been found behind that. Though Rohingya live in refugee camps, they are free to move around and/or go anywhere. Unlike the USA or other developed countries, no work authorization is required in Bangladesh. As a result, Rohingya males are able to illegally gain employment as day laborers in many places, and receive lower wages than the local laborers. One of the local respondents stated that:

“I was renovating my house and hired some Rohingya workers along with Bangladeshi workers. While Bangladeshi workers are demanding 700 BDT (\$7), the Rohingya workers are ready to work in only 350-450(\$4) Taka in the whole day.”

According to the respondents, most of the local people are farmers or fishermen by profession, and things changed with the arrival of refugees. Local farmers and contract-based day laborers cannot compete with the Rohingya refugees on wages. Because the refugees offer their services for low wages, the local people keep losing potential employment opportunities.

Rickshaw is a very common mode of transportation in Bangladesh. Most of the poor people can easily own and drive this vehicle across the country. The influx of Rohingya has a great impact in this sector. Since most of the Rohingya are poor and they do not have official job opportunity or authorization in Bangladesh, they choose to be Rickshaw puller, which is also comparatively easier for them than other professions. One of the local respondents has shared that

Rickshaw renters' company are bound to check all legal paper before renting a rickshaw to any person. Some time they charge more money to Rohingya at the time of renting and allow them to use the rickshaw without any legal papers.

Local respondents explained a large number of Bangladeshi women work as maids in Cox's Bazar; it might be in house (residential) or hotel (commercial). Most of the poor women work around 3/4 hours in a particular house. They cook, clean the house and wash cloths. They earn 70/80 taka (less than \$1) per day. After the arrival of the Rohingya, this labor market has shrunk for local Bangladeshi women. Since work authorization is not required in Bangladesh, many Rohingya women joined the labor force as maids in Cox's Bazar. By joining the labor force in large numbers, the Rohingya women depressed the hourly wages for all maids.

4. Conclusion

This study has focused solely the labor market. The influx of Rohingya refugees into Cox's Bazar has resulted in a notable demographic shift, significantly affecting the local labor market. The sudden population surge due to the refugee influx has likely presented both challenges and opportunities in terms of employment. The study explores the dynamics of the labor market in Ukhiya and Teknaf, investigating how it has responded to the presence of Rohingya refugees. This examination encompasses shifts in employment rates, types of available jobs, wage structures, and the overall labor market dynamics, reflecting the increased demand for labor and potential changes in skill requirements prompted by the refugee situation.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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