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NEGOTIATING AN 'INCLUSIVE' SPACE IN AN 'EMERGENCY' SITUATION: NON-FORMAL EDUCATION FOR ROHINGYA REFUGEE CHILDREN IN BANGLADESH

Half of all Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh are children who are not allowed to receive a formal education in public institutions, even though education is one of the fundamental rights of all children, regardless of their social status. In coordination with the government of Bangladesh, UNICEF, and Save the Children International have been conducting a non-formal educational programme for the children of Rohingya refugees since 2017. Domestic partner NGOs implement the initiative. The purpose of this study is to examine the policy and the infrastructural arrangements for its implementation process and determine how these may influence the inclusion of Rohingya children in the education system. We carried out a qualitative study in the Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts of Cox's Bazar. Between August 2020 and January 2021, we conducted 30 in-depth interviews with Rohingya parents and children, teachers, government officials, a UNICEF representative, and NGO employees, as well as gathered materials from various secondary sources. We find the programme has set up a veritable infrastructure. Through discussion, dialogue, and resilience, the local and global NGOs and the Rohingya have negotiated with the government an 'inclusive' space for the expansion of the educational sphere, although more needs to be done to ensure inclusive education in a current emergency situation. The preliminary overview and analysis of the programme, including the gathered evidence, help to understand the challenges that countries

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like Bangladesh face in addressing the educational inclusion of refugee children in South Asian settings. Policymakers should use the empirical results to develop inclusive and reflective educational policies for refugee children.

The Rohingyas are among the most persecuted peoples in the world. For decades, the Myanmar government has discriminated against the Rohingya, executed oppressive actions, and excluded them from citizenship rights (Ullah 2011; Roy Chowdhury 2021). Unlawful military operations and communal violence in Myanmar drove the Rohingya to Bangladesh in 1978, 1992–93, 2012, 2016, and 2017 (Roy Chowdhury 2019; Habib 2021; Habib & Roy Chowdhury 2023); they number a million now (Alam 2018; Roy Chowdhury 2020). More than 700,000 Rohingya – over 60 % of them are children (over 400,000) and women – fled to Bangladesh in late August 2017 (UNICEF 2017; Roy Chowdhury, Abid 2022). Nearly 50 % of eight-year-old children have completed Grade-1 schooling in Myanmar before being displaced (ReliefWeb 2018). The refugees, particularly children, have experienced an 'emergency situation' of humanitarian crisis and the trauma of dislocation from their home country – deaths, separation, damage, injuries – that made the process of emotional, psychological, and societal relocation an intricate one (Thomas 2016).

Education and support can help integrate them into the host country's education system and maintain their social well-being (Cerna 2019). In coordination with the government of Bangladesh, UNICEF, and Save the Children International have been conducting an inclusive educational programme for the children of Rohingya refugees since 2017. The programme is being implemented by 24 partner NGOs and it is the primary object of our analysis.

We pose two interrelated research questions: (1) What are the policies and the infrastructural basis that the Bangladesh government has adopted for the educational inclusion of Rohingya children in this emergency? (2) What are the views of the NGOs that implement this programme and the Rohingyas about this policy and its benefits and limitations? The purpose of this study is to examine the policy, its implementation, and its infrastructural basis to determine how these might influence the inclusion of the Rohingya children in the education system in the near future.

Few have studied the educational inclusion of the Rohingya in Bangladesh. Our study provides an 'emic' perspective of those implementing the non-formal and inclusive education programme in an emergency and of the beneficiaries to discuss the problems and prospects of this policy and analyse the current situation. We find that through discussion, dialogue, and resilience, civil society and the refugees have negotiated a veritable space for non-formal and inclusive education, but a lot more needs to be done to ensure an inclusive education for the

Rohingya children. In the next section, we clarify the two concepts, namely 'educational inclusion' and 'emergency situation' that guide our research.

'Educational Inclusion' in an 'Emergency Situation'

In general, in the times of a suddenly emerging crisis, there are emergency humanitarian groups who work towards ensuring survival and make life-saving interventions in respect to communities impacted by the crisis. In our case, the interest in a policy for educating refugee children and the demand for it has been growing in the past few years, particularly expressed by humanitarian agencies. Some humanitarian aid workers and donors primarily focus on education during crises as a long-term development intervention and rights-based strategy, because the children's dignity, autonomy, and integrity are promoted by the rights-based approach while they are in school (UNICEF, UNESCO 2007).

UNHCR, UNESCO, and UNICEF – the three UN agencies providing education in emergency situations – are central to achieving Education for All (EFA), a movement and the subsequent Sustainable Development Goal (quality education), which both emphasize the right to get an education in a mainstream system. Article 34 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees declares that states shall, as far as possible, facilitate the integration and naturalization of refugees. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) institutionalized the recognition and protection of children's rights, including the right to education. The right to receive an education contains four key components, namely availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability, as stated in Article 13 of the International Covenant (UN General Assembly 1966). Regardless of the status of the children, governments have a responsibility to encourage or support access to education for children living on their territory.

Education in an emergency is considered a core element of human rights, which was emphasized at both the 1990 World Conference on EFA in Jomtien and the 2000 EFA Dakar Framework of Action. The concept of education in emergencies is based on 'Education as Humanitarian Response,' and it ensures the education of minimum quality and access, through emergencies to recovery (Sinclair 2006). Three phases of the educational response during emergencies – recreational/preparatory, non-formal schooling, and curriculum re-introduction – have been introduced by UNHCR in 1995 (Aguilar, Retamal 1998). Organizations, financiers, and educators all use a variety of strategies and methods to participate in emergencies at different stages (Kagawa 2005).

Civil society efforts led to the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) in 2000. This network endorsed the Minimum Standards for Education hand book in 2004, and it was updated in 2010. The INEE guidelines state that this will entail actions like making sure school buildings are physically accessible, giving teachers support and training, and raising awareness among

educators, parents, other kids, communities, humanitarian actors, and policy-makers (INEE 2009).

Inclusive education, in general, refers to the fundamental right to access education for everyone, without being excluded (Stubbs 2008). Accessibility and a quality learning environment are essential elements of inclusive education that improve outcomes for all learners. Inclusive education empowers every child regardless of their abilities and backgrounds, like children with disabilities, refugees and migrant children, children of minorities, and children who are victims of violence and abuse, and are culturally subjugated 'subalterns' in some sense (Roy Chowdhury 2016). It also creates real learning opportunities in the same classrooms and the same schools (UNICEF 2018). Every student must be present, engaged, and successful for inclusive education to be successful (Heijnen-Maathuis 2016).

At the starting point of the Rohingya influx into Bangladesh, the amount of foreign funds was significant. That crisis was dubbed as 'level 3' emergency, which later had dropped to one followed by funding cuts. As a result, several NGOs have been forced to cease operations due to a lack of support. Though the nature and vision of education are long-term, emergency education focuses on the short-term technicalities and literacy (Dryden-Peterson et al. 2019). Moreover, the context of Bangladesh is special: integrating the Rohingya is not the aim of the government, so an 'emergency' and 'inclusive' dimension of education can only be discussed without the emphasis on integration. International donor agencies implement the Education in Emergencies (EiE) programme using a rights-based approach to guarantee quality education for Rohingya children in Bangladesh (Prodip, Garnett 2019). With approval from the Bangladeshi government, INGOs and NGOs adopt locally developed curriculum and materials that adhere to INEE standards.

Methodology and Fieldwork

This is an independent scholarly study and was not commissioned or funded by any government, UNICEF, or any other agency or NGO. We conducted this study in the Ukhiya and Teknaf sub-districts of Cox's Bazar, which is one of the poorest and most vulnerable districts in Bangladesh, and where the presence of refugees has strained local resources. We selected four schools, one from each camp in Balukhali-Kutupalong (Mega camp 19 and camp 4) from Ukhiya, Unciprang (camp 22), and Leda (camp 24) from Teknaf. We adopted a qualitative methodology and used purposive sampling to select the camps and the respondents. To collect the primary data for this analysis, we conducted 30 in-depth interviews – 20 with men and 10 with women: 16 with refugees (school-going children, parents, teachers, Majhi who are religious leaders of the Rohingya); and 14 with government officials, NGO officials, and UNICEF representatives between August 2020 and January 2021.

In-depth Interviews were audio-recorded using digital media. The digital audio files and the text transcripts containing any identifying information will be destroyed after publishing this paper. Around four Rohingya school children were interviewed in the presence of their parents with their consent. In this paper, all respondents' names are mentioned anonymously with demographic information and organizational affiliation (where available). Of the 24 NGOs working with the region, we selected four actively implementing UNICEF's education policy – BRAC, The Community Development Centre (CODEC), Mukti, and Young Power in Social Action (YPSA) – and interviewed their representatives. We have selected these NGOs considering organizational strength, number of schools covered, and experience of long-term implementation of non-formal education projects. We analysed the in-depth interviews inductively, applying the method of narrative analysis. We present thematically relevant excerpts of the interviews wherever required.

Educational Policy and Infrastructure for the Inclusion of Rohingya Children in Bangladesh

Bangladesh ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (is it possible to say when?). Article 28 of the Convention promises all children the right to education and binds all signatory host states to provide free compulsory primary and secondary education to all children irrespective of legal status (Equal Rights Trust 2014). By ratifying the Convention, Bangladesh committed to protecting the rights of all children under any circumstance. However, the current non-formal education system for the children of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh does not meet that standard (Human Rights Watch 2019).

Bangladesh does not let Rohingya children receive formal education at public or camp schools. In addition, Bengali-language instruction and teaching in the national educational curriculum are forbidden in the camp schools (Ibid). About 10,000 Rohingya adolescents of school age have little access to formal education. After the second influx of the Rohingya, in 1991–92, 14 schools were constructed at Kutupalong and Nayapara camps in Cox's Bazar district by an NGO Concern Worldwide (Letchamanan 2013). The non-formal school education process at Nayapara camp was started after January 2000 (MSF 2002). After mid-1996, the government allowed non-formal education at the primary, but not at the secondary or tertiary level. The schools provide education from kindergarten to class 5, but the government did not list education as a basic service in the National Strategy on Myanmar Refugees and Undocumented Myanmar Nationals (Global Partnership for Education 2018). Along with primary education, adolescent and adult learning courses were arranged to improve literacy and arithmetic skills, but the enrolment was poor. The World Food Programme had arranged a few vocational training

programs as 'self-help activities' for women and girls in 2001 with only 73 women registering (MSF 2002).

In 2017, larger numbers of Rohingya started crossing into Bangladesh, and UNICEF and UNHCR set up a technical working group with experts to develop a learning framework as an alternative curriculum for them. The framework was drafted in consultation with the Bangladesh government, and the draft was presented to the education sector groups at Cox's Bazar (Technical Working Group 2019). In collaboration with the Bangladesh government, UNICEF and Save the Children International (SCI) kicked off a basic education program at the camps for refugee children aged 4–14 years old. The INEE training packs were adapted to the context of the crisis and used in 2017 to train the teachers of Rohingya children in primary school (Shohel 2020). At present, more than 300,000 children and adolescents receive non-formal education at over 3,200 temporary learning centres, most run with UNICEF support, and over 18,000 Rohingya adolescents (15–18 years) receive training in numeracy, vocational, and life skills (UNICEF 2020). UNICEF has also established Child-Friendly Spaces, where Rohingya children can play board games and puzzles and engage in other activities in a safe, welcoming environment.

All learning centres provide children's education initially based on the Learning Competency Framework and Approach curriculum (LCFA), approved by the government in 2019. Later, the government replaced the LCFA with the Guidelines for Informal Education Programming (Human Rights Watch 2019). Over 90 percent of the students at the learning centres are enrolled at levels 1 and 2 of the informal education system; these correspond to the formal education system with the pre-primary level up to grade 2. At levels 1 and 2, children are taught mathematics, social science, English, and Burmese languages, as well as life skills. Science is taught at levels 3 and 4, equivalent to grades 3–8 of formal education. According to the REACH (2021) assessment report, just over 52 % of Rohingya children were promoted to level 2 from level 1, while the promotion rate is even lower from level 3 to level 4 at 7 %. Additionally, between December 2018 and 2019, 43 % of children were upgraded from level 2 to level 3 as the report claimed. For each class, two teachers are recruited – one Bangladeshi from the host community and one Burmese-language instructor from the Rohingya community. All the educational materials are centrally prepared, developed, and printed by UNICEF and distributed to the learning centres through the education sector. UNICEF also provides professional development training to the teachers at the centres.

With the support of its partner organizations, UNICEF has formed Learning Centre Management Committees (LCMC) to manage each centre at a camp. Each committee comprises nine community members (50 % of whom are women) – imams (religious leaders), block Majhi (community leaders), guardians, Rohingya volunteers, children's representatives, and the members of site management committees. Learning centres are temporary bamboo structures

in small spaces that accommodate 40 students at most. In the camps, space is at a premium. Learning centres provide education in three two-hour shifts every day of the week (Human Rights Watch 2019). Recently, a report has claimed that 342 temporary learning centres are in danger from landslides and flooding (Education Sector 2018). A government representative from sub-district Primary Education Department said that

> The biggest challenge for the government is to allocate additional lands to establish more schools for Rohingya children in camp areas, the birth rate of Rohingya children is increasing every year; ensuring their right to education will be a big financial challenge for Bangladesh and aid agencies in the future (Telephonic interview, 20 November 2020).

In coordination with the Bangladesh government, UNICEF introduced the Myanmar curriculum on a pilot basis from grades 6 to 9 in the first 6 months of the year in 2020, but it postponed the programme because of COVID-19. This pilot programme intends to teach Rohingya children English, Burmese, mathematics, social studies, and science. The programme plans to recruit 250 teachers from both communities and train them to teach more children and students in other grades as well as to add other subjects over time (UNICEF 2020).

The Program Coordinator of the Education Sector in UNICEF says:

> We plan to ensure the use of [the] Myanmar curriculum in all learning centres in the camps by 2023. At first, we have targeted 10,000 children; students will be selected through a placement test. Only children who pass the placement test will be eligible for Levels 3 and 4. Till now, we have not received any cooperation from the Myanmar government regarding the accreditation of Rohingya children's education. Therefore, UNICEF is continuing its efforts to get international accreditation for the education of Rohingya children. We are working with Cambridge University now to get international accreditation (Telephonic interview, 15 January 2021).

Ismail (name changed), a Majhi, says:

> Since the government of this country is not giving opportunities to our children in public schools, it would be very beneficial for our children to be educated according to the Myanmar curriculum in the camp schools. But the question is, when we return to our country, will the Myanmar government recognize this education? (Interview, Camp 22, Teknaf, Cox's Bazar, 14 October 2020).

Rohingya leaders have set up several unofficial, refugee-run schools – such as madrasas or Islamic religious schools – that teach both religious and secular subjects (ICG 2019). A report shows that 67% of children between the ages of 6 and 14 are attending both madrasas and education centres, while 12% go to madrasas only (REACH 2019). The imam of the mosque at the Mega Camp says:

> We got a community centre from Islamic Relief, which is now being used as a mosque and madrasa. Since our religion is Islam, we have established this

madrasa feeling the need to give religious education to our children. So far, no obstacles have been encountered in running the madrasa (Interview, Camp 24, Teknaf, Cox's Bazar, 27 December 2020).

The Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis (ReliefWeb 2019) published several recommendations in its report, as did the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) (ReliefWeb 2020). To implement these recommendations, the 24 partner NGOs run around 126 education programmes at 34 refugee camps. We now discuss the implementation of the UNICEF program by BRAC, CODEC, Mukti, and YPSA at the Ukhiya and Teknaf camps in Cox's Bazar.

Domestic Partner NGOs: Implementing the Educational Inclusion Programme in an Emergency

BRAC, a partner organization of UNICEF and UNHCR, has been providing education to refugee children in Cox's Bazar. They have set up over 700 temporary learning centres, where over 61,000 children (52 % girls and 48 % boys) have enrolled already to receive an education. BRAC has recruited more than 1,600 teachers from both the host and Rohingya communities at these learning centres; the teachers run education programmes at 14 camps, including at 2 registered camps. The organization has targeted to enrol 100,000 children at 1,000 learning centres by 2021.

BRAC constructed a colourful two-storey centre at Kutupalong (Camp 4) of Ukhiya sub-district in Cox's Bazar in 2018. They have already built around 9 two-storey centres at the camps. Each centre has a toilet. The ground floor accommodates pre-primary students and the first-floor primary students. These learning centres, generally, provide early-grade learning, basic education, mathematics, psycho-social assistance, life skills, and life-saving information.

A Rohingya refugee at Camp 4 who has lived in Bangladesh since 2017 says: '*Here our children are getting free education in collaboration with BRAC and UNICEF, which has brought opportunities for us, while in Myanmar we had to spend money on children's education*' (Interview, 18 October 2020).

A Rohingya male student at Camp 19 who has lived in Bangladesh since 2017 says:

> The school teachers always taught us with care here. It was very difficult for us to understand the way teachers taught in Myanmar. Here we can easily learn everything, I will be able to get a job in the future, and will be able to help my family financially (Interview, 26 November 2020).

At 31 adolescent centres for children aged 14–18, nearly 3,540 students receive basic literacy, numeracy, and life skills and pre-vocational education. When all the learning centres were closed due to COVID-19, BRAC took some innovative steps to continue their education activities. A Sector Lead from BRAC says:

> During COVID 19, we engaged our Rohingya teachers and community mobilizers to visit Rohingya households, and [they were thus] able to monitor the education of more than 61,000 children. Parents were trained how to continue [the] education of their children in this situation; also, children received lessons over [the] phone every week (Telephonic interview, 26 January 2021).

CODEC, a partner organization of UNICEF and UNHCR, focuses on early education for children and basic literacy education. Since 2016, CODEC has worked with the Rohingya children living in camps. Initially, CODEC imparted life skills and literacy education without a syllabus; now, it provides Rohingya children with early learning and informal education. The organization has established 420 learning centres at Teknaf and Ukhiya sub-districts of Cox's Bazar, where 420 Bangladeshi and 350 Rohingya teachers teach 38,500 children. A Rohingya woman at Camp 24 who has lived in Bangladesh since 2018 says:

> My two children are studying [at] the camp school run by CODEC and UNICEF. Because of attending this school, they get pens, notebooks, books, bags, raincoats, umbrellas, and nutritious biscuits from the school. The children can learn English and Burmese from school, and my children have changed a lot since going to school, so we are happy (Interview, 3 October 2020).

Teachers are given basic training and introduced to teaching materials, and monthly learning circle meetings and fortnightly refresher training sessions are organized to address their questions. CODEC also arranges basic training on child safeguard policies and disaster risk and resilience programmes for technical officers, programme organizers, and teachers. The organization arranges annual cultural events, and parental meetings to provide psychological support. Learning centres serve as a safe space and raise awareness about vaccination activities, health, and hygiene. A Technical Officer at CODEC says:

> Rohingya girls over the age of 14 are not allowed to leave the house. They are willing to study but cannot go out of the house as they get older. In the beginning, there were many obstacles, but now they have decreased. It is often seen that parents leave a small child at home while collecting relief; other children in the family have to look after them, so they cannot go to school <…> Since they [place] more importance on religion, more emphasis should be placed on religious education, geography, and ethical issues (Interview, 10 December 2020).

With financial support from UNICEF, Mukti provides Rohingya children in Cox's Bazar education within the syllabus approved by the sector and government. Rohingya children are taught mathematics, the English and Burmese languages, life skills, and, outside the syllabus, hygiene, and ethics. To encourage the interest of Rohingya children and parents in education, Mukti strives to involve them in education fairs, receptions, parent meetings, educational competitions, and awareness days. A Technical Officer at Mukti says:

> When the Rohingya first settled here, they were unaware of many things. Education brought a positive change in their thinking and attitude. It has

been possible due to the regular meetings with parents and home visits by the teachers (Interview, 9 December 2020).

Mukti provides teachers with subject-based training during recruitment, orientation training on its rules and policies, and feedback. As an implementing body, Mukti takes all possible measures to maintain a child-friendly environment. Every learning centre is kept clean and tidy. There are posters on the walls with various proverbs, which help children receive moral education. Rohingya children spend a lot of time at the centres. When children enter, they look happy. The dropout rate of Rohingya children here is very low; if they migrate or relocate, Mukti helps them enrol at a learning centre nearby.

YPSA in collaboration with Save the Children International implements a non-formal education programme for Rohingya children. YPSA operates 100 learning centres (13 in Teknaf and 8 in Ukhiya) in 12 camps. They also have 40 home-based learning centres and 9 girl-friendly spaces. The learning centres serve more than 10,000 Rohingya children. The Programme Coordinator of the Education Project at YPSA says:

> While in Myanmar, 90% of the Rohingya children in our learning centres did not receive any formal education. They learned at the local *Nurani* madrasas. When they came to Bangladesh, we initially taught them only literacy and numeracy. Later, they are being educated according to LCFA (Telephonic interview, 19 January 2021).

These learning centres employ more than 250 teachers who work to provide education. During recruitment, at each learning centre, YPSA provides teachers with basic, subject-based, monthly, and refresher training, and training in psychological first aid and social and emotional learning. They also host learning circles twice a week to exchange knowledge among themselves. Each learning centre is managed by a centre education coordinator. Each committee is made up of a camp imam (religious leader), block Majhi, parents, and children's representatives. They are involved in community-level activities such as monitoring the presence/absence of children and advising any parent who does not want to send their child to learning centres.

Also, YPSA operates home-based learning centres in two shifts. In the morning shift, they use games to teach children over the age of four; children of this age are mainly prepared for informal education. In the second shift, twelve adolescent girls are educated at each home-based learning centre. Most of these adolescent girls never went to school or stopped at the onset of puberty. Zunayed (name changed), a teacher at an YPSA learning centre, says:

> They have a belief that when a girl reaches the age of puberty, she no longer needs to go to school. It is taboo to walk in front of their men at this time. That is why they forbid girls to go to learning centres. We usually provide health and hygiene education to these adolescent girls at these home-based learning centres so that they can be aware of their children in the future (Interview, 10 December 2020).

At their girl-friendly centres, YPSA conducts educational activities two days a week, teaches girls to sew to generate income, and provides various recreational facilities.

Conclusion

The Rohingya have faced immense persecution in Myanmar, and there search that analyses it is significant. It is necessary to go beyond that trauma to understand their problems in host societies, how they develop resilience and adapt to new realities, and their agentic role in shaping their future. Despite the geopolitical crisis in the region and with its limited resources and many poverty-stricken populations to manage, the Bangladesh government provides education to the children of Rohingya refugees and tries to manage this crisis, which is laudable.

The UNICEF programme in Bangladesh – although only at a preliminary stage – has already achieved considerable success in inclusive education of the Rohingya refugee children. The Rohingyas have also acceded that the programme has benefited them. Despite successes, however, the quality of education that the Rohingya refugee children receive at camp schools is suboptimal, because the implementation of the programme faces many constraints. We propose a few measures –some that may work better within the existing constraints and others that seek to remove them– for the government and partners to consider.

Funding is limited and short-term, little space is available, the school infrastructure is not fully developed yet, and most of the learning centres are at risk from a natural disaster. The education sector needs adequate school infrastructure, basic emergency preparedness, and a response plan. The development partners, UNICEF, and other donor agencies need to raise funding by creating public awareness about the problem worldwide and persuading private organizations, companies, and NGOs – at home and abroad – to donate to build the necessary infrastructure. Educating girls is important; the partners strive to develop that awareness in society and make the programme gainfully inclusive. The partners have recruited Rohingya teachers and achieved some success in reducing the gender gap and inequality in access to education. However, these programmes do not currently educate girls on issues such as reproductive health, contraceptive use, and menstrual hygiene practices. If Rohingya women are recruited to teach and trained to educate girls in proper health care, and also to prevent child marriage, the women would be gainfully employed, and their presence in schools may make it easier to persuade families to educate their girl children.

Skilled subject teachers should be recruited and trained to teach Rohingya children. The curriculum should include geography, history, and the knowledge and skills related to survival and peacebuilding so that a long-term dimension of education is embedded in the programme. More children experience emotional anguish and physical problems because of conflicts and crises. An inclusive

education approach and institutions can contribute to executing the social and economic rights of refugee children. In emergency situations, inclusive education encourages teachers and communities to respect each child's special learning needs and to help them achieve their full potential. Inclusive education can also promote social cohesion, stability, and peacebuilding in the society, and create pathways for the Rohingya's long-term inclusion in the future.

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