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Vulnerability and Social Cohesion in Shared Spaces: A Cross Country Analysis of Forcibly Displaced Rohingyas in Indonesia and Bangladesh

Preliminary research report for Indonesia

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Background

Rohingyas in Indonesia

As of early 2024, Indonesia hosted approximately 12,295 refugees, with around 1,225 identified as Rohingya. However, recent surges in arrivals have significantly increased these numbers. Between mid-November and mid-December 2023, nine boats carrying 1,543 Rohingya refugees disembarked in Aceh, marking the largest influx since 2015. In October 2024 alone, at least 395 Rohingya refugees arrived in Indonesia by boat, a 700% increase compared to the same period the previous year. These figures suggest that the current Rohingya refugee population in Indonesia is significantly higher than earlier estimates, reflecting an ongoing and escalating humanitarian situation.

Rohingya refugees typically make perilous journeys from Bangladesh to Indonesia, driven by desperation to escape dire conditions in overcrowded refugee camps and the lack of opportunities for safety and stability. The camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, host hundreds of thousands of Rohingyas, living under harsh conditions with limited access to basic necessities, education, or employment. Violence and insecurity, including incidents of armed group activity, further push refugees to seek better opportunities abroad. Indonesia, particularly the Aceh region, is often seen as a destination due to its predominantly Muslim population and perceived solidarity.

The journey from Bangladesh to Indonesia usually involves hazardous sea travel in makeshift boats. Refugees endure weeks at sea, often with little food, water, or shelter. Smugglers frequently organize these trips, promising safety and better prospects but often leaving refugees stranded in open waters or charging exorbitant fees. The overcrowded boats, combined with poor weather conditions and lack of navigational expertise, pose significant risks. Tragically, deaths during these voyages are common due to drowning, malnutrition, dehydration, or violence.

Many refugees arrive in Aceh, where they are often discovered by local fishermen or wash ashore. The Acehnese people, known for their history of conflict and

displacement, have historically extended initial humanitarian support, offering food and temporary shelter. However, the journeys are grueling, with some refugees arriving in critical condition, suffering from physical injuries or psychological trauma caused by the arduous journey. Recent incidents, such as the drowning of young refugees who attempted to swim to shore, underscore the life-threatening nature of these migrations.

The refugees' arrival is facilitated by push factors like ethnic persecution in Myanmar and deteriorating camp conditions in Bangladesh, combined with pull factors such as the hope for better treatment in Muslim-majority nations like Indonesia. Despite their arrival in a relatively safer place, challenges persist, as Indonesia's legal framework does not permit refugees to work, leaving them reliant on humanitarian aid and community support. The dangerous journeys and uncertain futures highlight the urgent need for comprehensive regional and international solutions to the Rohingya refugee crisis.

Data from UNHCR Indonesia (2024)

Name and type of shelters	Number of refugees
Informal site - Kulee	68 refugees
Informal site - Rawang	116 refugees
Informal site - Terminal C Labuhan Haji	152 refugees
Temporary shelter – Mina Raya	165 refugees
Temporary shelter – Ex immigration office	288 refugees

Method

The study was located in the villages of Leuen Tanjung and Kulee. We visited an informal site in Kulee and a temporary shelter in Mina Raya. The preliminary research is

conducted through observations, interviews with Rohingya refugees, and focus group discussion (FGD) with the host communities.

In total, 32 participants engaged, 15 Rohingyas refugees were interviewed, including 8 men and 7 women. 17 host communities participated in FGDs comprising 11 men and 6 women.

Findings

a. Perceived vulnerability of Rohingyas refugee

Rohingya refugees' perceptions of vulnerability are diverse and influenced by their living conditions. There are clear differences in how vulnerability is perceived between those staying in the temporary shelter (Mina Raya) and those at the informal site (Kulee). Currently, Mina Raya accommodates approximately 165 refugees, while Kulee accommodates 62-68 refugees. The two sites differ significantly in terms of infrastructure. Mina Raya provides semi-permanent buildings that offer more stability and security, whereas Kulee provides simple tents on the coastline, leaving refugees more exposed to environmental risks. The differences contribute to varied perceptions of vulnerability among refugees.

1) Identity and status

The status and identity of an individual play a crucial role in determining their level of vulnerability, particularly in crises. In the case of the Rohingya community, their status as stateless refugees and their identity as an ethnic and religious minority place them at a significantly higher level of vulnerability compared to other groups. The lack of citizenship status prevents them from accessing fundamental rights, such as healthcare, education, economic opportunities, and legal protection. This condition also exposes them to various forms of violence.

Additionally, their minority status subjects them to systematic persecution and discrimination, both in their homeland and within host communities. Focus group discussions in both villages reveal that local populations often view Rohingya refugees with suspicion, questioning their status and the validity of their claims as genocide victims. Some even expressed a preference for Palestinian refugees, with one

participant stating, *“If they were Palestinians, we would accept them, because Palestinian people are victims of genocide.”*

While both Palestinian and Rohingya refugees face highly alarming situations and are victims of genocide, there is a fundamental difference between the two. Palestinian refugees hold citizenship status, which provides them with better recognition and protection at the international level. In contrast, Rohingya refugees "lack citizenship status and are unrecognized," further exacerbating their vulnerability across many aspects of life.

2) Physical environment

Rohingya refugees at **Mina Raya** face significant challenges. While they are protected from direct exposure to natural elements due to semi-permanent shelter structures, their freedom of movement is highly restricted. For nearly two years, they have been confined to the shelter and require special permission to leave. This limitation has adversely affected their mental health. One refugee explained *“I face mental health problems because we always stay in this place and we can't go outside. We got more support but still did not meet everyone's needs, especially for the food, there's no other option all the same”*.



Figure 1. The temporary shelter condition

The shelter actually offers relatively good facilities, such as gender-separated bathrooms, prayer spaces, and communal areas, as provided by UNHCR and IOM. However, overcrowding is a persistent issue, housing 5-7 families in each room. In March 2024, the population at Mina Raya peaked at 244, making the conditions even more challenging.



Fig 2. room condition and facilities in Mina Raya

Meanwhile, the situation at the informal site in **Kulee** is quite different and presents its challenges. Refugees live in simple tents provided by IOM and UNHCR. They face several critical challenges, including security issues, living environment, the fulfillment of basic needs, and limitations in practicing their religious activities. The tents provide insufficient protection against extreme weather conditions, including heavy rain, strong winds, and intense heat, leaving the refugees uncomfortable and vulnerable. Moreover, limited access to basic facilities such as sanitation, clean water, and private spaces worsens their situations. As expressed by one refugee, *“In Aceh (Kulee informal site), the heat is increasingly difficult to bear. The sand becomes so scorching during*

the day that I can't walk on it. Rising seawater sometimes floods our camp, leaving us scared and without proper shelter. Heavy winds and rain make conditions unbearable and unsafe. As a refugee, I feel weak and powerless, with little control over my situation. All I desire is a place where I can feel safe and protected from these harsh conditions."



Fig 3. The condition of informal site in Kulee

3) Basic needs

Even with the involvement of at least seven organizations—UNHCR, IOM, Yayasan Geutanyoe, Paska Aceh, YKMI, YAGI, and Yayasan Balee Seribu Bintang (YBSB)—that provide vocational training, education, and basic needs, many refugees continue to feel disempowered. Even with the involvement of at least seven organizations—UNHCR, IOM, Yayasan Geutanyoe, Paska Aceh, YKMI, YAGI, and Yayasan Balee Seribu Bintang (YBSB)—that provide vocational training, education, and basic needs, many refugees continue to feel disempowered. They often compare their situation unfavorably with that of Rohingya refugees in other locations, such as Pekanbaru or Medan. One refugee stated *“And now I feel vulnerable because we cannot get facilities like other refugees. As I have, tell you before, I have, explained you before that we are receiving the same food, for two years and, not any financial,*

assistance from any organization. So how can we be empowered? As a persecuted and genocide survivor in Myanmar, we feel really vulnerable because being in one place, sitting and praying, just eating and sleeping. There is no other activity at all in one place for two years.”

Food provision is still a significant concern for refugees. Many of them report that the available food lacks variety and does not meet specific dietary needs for groups such as infants, children, and the elderly. Consequently, many refugees have started cooking their own meals near their living areas.

The refugees in **Kulee** have expressed concerns about meeting their basic needs. They feel that due to cultural differences, the food provided does not align with their preferences. This issue arises from the vendor-based approach used by service providers at the informal site, which often overlooks the refugees' desired flavors and dietary restrictions. Additionally, they face challenges in accessing clean water, as the available supply is salty and considered unsuitable for bathing. *“Sometimes we sleep with a hungry stomach because we cannot able to take the sweet care sweet curry. So, also, we didn't get purified bath water. We do have shower. We we are just, take a pure heat to the bath. You see here. Some wells are here well's water is not good. Salty. Salty. The The water is salty. It is not good for the people to have bath several times we have compliant, UNHCR, IOM, but they don't respond.”*

“So, here specifically in Aceh, we are staying almost one year. We didn't get any kind of proper health care. Also we cannot get our rice probably on time.

Opinions on their vulnerability vary, but many find strength and feel empowered by family reunification. Their primary concern remains their children's education, ensuring their development and educational opportunities. A refugee mentioned that *“As long as I am reunited with my family I feel empowered, but I have kids, I just thought about our kids' education”.*

4) Social environment

A significant difference between the living conditions of refugees in Kulee and those in Mina Raya is their level of interaction with the local community. Refugees in Kulee are more exposed to and able to engage with the local population. However, this interaction often leads to misunderstandings and conflicts between refugees and the locals. This creates a sense of insecurity, especially for women and children. One refugee shared: *“I feel vulnerable because I can’t fight back when someone attacks me. Sometimes the local people or security open our tents without permission, which is very uncomfortable, especially for the women and children. One day, a local woman suddenly kicked me in the forehead, but I couldn’t complain; I just had to accept it because I’m a refugee, only staying here temporarily.”*

5) Culture and religion

The Rohingya refugees are known for their strong adherence to Islam. One of the key reasons they chose Aceh as a landing site is their religious connection with the predominantly Muslim population in the region, which offered them hope of being welcomed and protected by fellow Muslims. However, during interviews, few refugees in Kulee expressed their frustration over the limitations they face in practicing their religion. A significant concern is that their children are unable to learn the Holy Qur’an because of the lack of madrasah facilities in the camp. They are concerned about the lack of an imam in Kulee to lead prayers and teach their children to recite the Qur’an, which they consider a fundamental spiritual need. This situation deepens their sense of loss and makes it more challenging for them to uphold their religious values amid the hardships of camp life. As one refugee said *“We worry about our responsibility in the afterlife if we don’t teach our children Islamic values. It’s concerning to see them grow up without guidance in learning the Qur’an, practicing their faith, and understanding their religion. Unfortunately, We lack basic religious guidance in the camp, including an imam for prayers and a Qur’an teacher.”*



Fig 4. Rohingya refugee perform adzan in temporary prayer space

6) Psychological trauma

Though the two groups of refugees in each shelter face different vulnerabilities, as minorities they share a common challenge: a collective trauma. This trauma arises from their shared experiences of systemic oppression, violence, discrimination, and forced displacement, acts of genocide, denial of citizenship that have continued for years in their homeland. Additionally, the limited living conditions in the camps, uncertainty about their future, and loss of cultural and religious identity further intensify the impacts of this collective trauma for both groups. This mentioned by the refugees: *“Because of genocide and my sons and my people get killed.”*

“So in refugee camps, our situation is becoming worse day by day. So So also some traffickers are treating our Rohingya people to give money. If If they will not pay money, they will try to kill them. So we didn't we don't feel so good in Bangladesh due to act of criminals”

“So we I left from Myanmar, my own country, because of the persecution, the rape, mass killing, gay rape, and, persecution, torture, all this, we our citizenship has been stripped, taken away. So we are denied from citizenship, election, health care, and

everything. So that is why I left from from here. So that is why we have have we came to Bangladesh. Even my son, that son, he has been arrested. Arrested. And he was tortured by Myanmar, so he escaped. And then our village and, our host is burned, and all the people are coming to Bangladesh to save life.”

b. Social cohesion between Rohingyas and host communities

Social cohesion is characterized by mutual trust, shared values, and interpersonal connections among individuals (Ziegler et al., 2011: 70). It represents a core dimension of social capital, defined as the resources available through social networks and relationships (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000). For Rohingyas in Indonesia navigating narratives of exclusion and rejection, social cohesion plays a pivotal role. Analyzing both in-group and out-group dynamics is key to understanding how it impacts the complexity of their vulnerabilities, either mitigating or exacerbating them.

Interaction dynamics dan sharing practices

Social cohesion between refugees and host communities varies significantly depending on the context and existing barriers to interaction. In the **Mina Raya** temporary shelter, which employs a detention-like approach, interactions between refugees and the local community are highly restricted. For nearly two years, refugees have lived in the camp with minimal organic interactions, mainly participating in activities organized by institutions, such as sports competitions, cooking events, and embroidery workshops. Despite these limitations, some refugees express gratitude for the hospitality shown by the local community saying, *“We always try to interact with the local community here because as a Muslim brother, So as far as so for humanity, they share their, their, land to stay for us. We have been refused in their land. So, yeah, we are really grateful about we have at the moment, we have good, interaction, but I hope, we hope that the interaction will get better.”*

Some refugees noted that their interactions with the host community are mainly transactional, involving the purchase of goods or the hiring of locals by organizations in temporary shelters. However, they face challenges, particularly due to a language

barrier. Although a few can speak Bahasa Melayu, many feel uneasy about communicating and fear misunderstandings. Additionally, refugees perceive the language barrier as a factor that creates unfamiliarity with the local culture. *“There are, many, some of the challenges like, as we cannot get out of the camp so that can so that we cannot learn their language very well, and so we are not familiar with their culture. So, because of, not having better interaction with the local people. So at the moment, sometimes if they come here and we will come them, and we, try to interact as much as possible”.*

In Kulee, some refugees have interactions with the host community. Sometimes, the host community asks for help from the refugees to string fishnets and assist in their fields. They empathize with the refugees' difficult situation and choose to offer them opportunities to earn an income through work. *“Although sometimes we provide food for them, many of them still struggle to afford even the simplest treats for their children. It's difficult to watch children go to the shop only to realize they can't buy anything. So we offer them to earn money by working with us”.*

A refugee also shared their experience, saying, *“I help the fishermen by tying fishnets, and I earn between IDR 15,000 and 20,000 for my assistance.”* This highlights how these small yet meaningful exchanges provide opportunities for refugees to support themselves while also fostering connections with the host community.

Acceptance and rejection

A complex interplay of media narratives and societal perceptions has shaped the acceptance of refugees in Leuen Tanjung. The local community's perspective highlights how misinformation and prejudice can influence the social dynamics between refugees and host communities.

Two waves of Rohingya refugees have arrived at the Mina Raya Camp—one in January 2023 and another in December 2023. The first wave received sympathy and support from the residents of Leuen Tanjung, who felt a connection as fellow Muslims. However, the situation changed after the second arrival, which brought a larger number of refugees and negative narratives on social media. This led to growing discomfort

among locals, along with misunderstandings and fears about potential impacts. Consequently, many residents felt that refugees should remain confined to the shelter and limit interactions with the community.

The situation in Kulee presents a different dynamic. Initially, the local community tended to reject the presence of Rohingya refugees. This rejection was driven by social media narratives that raised concerns about the potential dominance of Rohingya refugees in the area. However, after interacting with the refugees, the community recognized that these concerns were baseless, as the refugees were also facing extreme hardships. The community's acceptance or rejection was shaped by various factors. Notably, the involvement of local and international agencies like IOM and UNHCR played a crucial part in encouraging discussions and collaborative initiatives. These actions were instrumental in promoting understanding and compassion within the local population, thereby lessening stigma and enhancing the relationship between the host community and refugees. As one Kulee resident noted, discussions led by IOM and UNHCR reminded them of their own experiences as refugees during past conflicts and the tsunami disaster, evoking empathy and solidarity for the Rohingya.

Trust dynamics

Trust is crucial in fostering social cohesion between host communities and refugees. It can decrease the tension such as suspicion and fear, allowing collaboration and communication between them. For refugees, it can nurture acceptance and security, as for host communities, Trust enables them to view refugees as individuals who can contribute to society rather than viewing them as a burden.

Both groups, refugees and the host community in Mina Raya, still show a lack of mutual trust. In Mina Raya, the lack of interaction strengthens residents' suspicions about refugees, while in Kulee, refugees are concerned about the potential conflict, similar to previous experiences, even though they can work in the village. One refugee also shared that *“About the conflict between us, We can’t tell UNHCR or IOM because we’re afraid the local people might force us to leave”*.

c. Tension

Tension in fostering social cohesion refers to the conflicts and challenges that arise when building trust and unity within or between communities. These tensions can undermine efforts to build a harmonious and inclusive society. This section will explore the tensions between refugees and host communities.

One of the primary tensions in Mina Raya is the local community's dissatisfaction with the government and the prolonged stay of refugees. The Mina Raya facility, which was originally meant as a home and Islamic boarding school for orphans, has been used as a temporary refuge for more than two years. This has caused dissatisfaction among residents, who feel the facility is not being used as originally planned. As noted by the host communities, *"First they said it would be a week, then a year, and now it's been two years. We can't voice our concerns, so we're disappointed with the government"*.

Added to that, the varying interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence between the Rohingya refugees, who follow the Hanafi madhhab, and the local Indonesian community, which adheres to the Syafi'i madhhab, present a challenge to fostering social cohesion. Although these differences may appear minor, they significantly impact cultural and religious practices, ultimately influencing daily routines and social interactions. During FGD, one of the religious leaders expressed *"In Indonesia, we practice different madhhabs, which makes us uncomfortable because our ways of worship are quite different"*.

Suspicion between the host communities and the refugees was also a challenge. The host community believed that the refugees in Mina Raya were unwilling to work and questioned the truth of their stories, including claims of having fled from Cox's Bazar. One member of the host community stated, *"We have heard nothing about this person there. These people have been provided with a place in the shelter camp, but they don't want to work or stay, so they ran away."*

Initial fear and mistrust from the host community, along with perceived cultural misunderstandings, created barriers to mutual respect and trust. Concerns about the refugees' intentions and difficulties in adapting to local norms complicated integration efforts.

The local community initially viewed the refugees with suspicion, fearing ulterior motives. This mistrust intensified due to behaviors seen as disrespectful, such as leaving without permission and not following cultural expectations. One community member reflected this sentiment: *“At the beginning, we were concerned they might have other intentions for coming here. Over time we realized they didn't cause any harm and simply need a place to stay. Initially, their behavior bothered us—they were so stubborn, always left without permission, and didn't respect our cultural norms. But now, I see some positive changes, and the interactions started to improve.”*