Beyond Dichotomies: Rethinking Conflict Dynamics between the Refugee-Host Community in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

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Abstract

Why does the relationship between refugees and hosts in long-term displacement always seem to fail? Global displacement presents a significant challenge; yet existing analytical frameworks frequently simplify complex dynamics into a binary struggle. This study argues that such reductionism conceals the true drivers of conflict. Our objective is to systematically examine the multi-layered conflicts, exemplified by the protracted displacement in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, using the complexity paradigm, analysing actor, issue, and behavioural complexity. The methodology relies on qualitative fieldwork, including 40 in-depth interviews with refugees, host community members, local leaders and humanitarian practitioners, and document analysis. The main findings show that the conflict is a complex adaptive system, where hostility is not inevitable but induced by policy-driven competition (such as the restriction of legal work) and interconnected loops of escalation. Specifically, substantial cuts in humanitarian aid intensify desperation, promote illegal activities, and perpetuate host community bias, systematically undermining initial solidarity. This study confirms the limitations of reductionist crisis management and presents explicit implications: mitigating conflict requires systemic policy initiatives aimed at addressing statelessness and establishing sustainable integration models, rather than merely managing symptoms.

Keywords: *Refugee-Host Relations; Conflict Complexity; Protracted Displacement; Rohingya Refugee Crisis; Humanitarian Action*

Introduction

"*There will come a day when the ancient Feni River will be red with human blood and be flooded with severed human heads*": a long-standing prophecy transmitted through generations among the Ukhiya and Teknaf in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, a place hosting more than a million Rohingya refugees from the neighbouring country Myanmar. This prophecy has been transmitted from grandparents to grandchildren

and is now firmly entrenched in the consciousness of the entire host community. Community members are increasingly apprehensive over the prophecy, since they perceive the severed heads may be theirs. As the Rohingya people assert that Teknaf and Ukhiya were historically their ancestors' territory and may seek to reclaim it, rendering an unimaginable bloodbath (BBC Media Action, 2019). This prognosis illustrates the current fragility of the relationship between Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi host communities.

The Rohingya refugee crisis is one of the most severe long-term displacement issues globally, with repercussions extending beyond this singular instance. By the end of 2024, 123.2 million individuals had been forcibly displaced globally (UNHCR, 2025, p. 2). Prolonged displacement exacerbates refugee and host community tensions, jeopardising regional stability and humanitarian principles. Studies show that binary and camp-centric models frequently fail to effectively address the complexities of refugee-host conflict (Idris, 2017; Michail, 2025). These techniques perpetuate dependence, intensify polarisation, and neglect interconnected social and economic factors, ignoring root causes. Systematic analysis reveals that solutions rarely address multifaceted issues, rather their symptoms. (Idris, 2017; Michail, 2025).

Since August 2017, about 740,000 Rohingya refugees have fled Myanmar's state persecution. An additional 100,000 Rohingyas have fled to Bangladesh since the hostilities resumed in 2023. News suggests several hundred others are waiting to enter (Shuvo, 2025). The total number of refugees now approaches 1.3 million, including 967,000 in 33 camps in Cox's Bazar district, 36,000 on Bhasan Char Island, and thousands more awaiting registration (JRP, 2025). Initially, host communities exhibited considerable generosity, despite their own impoverished and vulnerable circumstances. They opened their homes and pooled their resources (Ansar & Md. Khaled, 2021). After eight years of enforced displacement, this spirit eroded. Tensions escalated across multiple dimensions: competition for scarce resources such as firewood, water, and employment; economic repercussions from labour market disruptions and inflation; cultural disparities fostering social alienation; security concerns stemming from armed factions; and ecological degradation resulting from deforestation (Alam & Dutta, 2020; Babu, 2020). Recent developments exacerbated these demands. The 2025–26 Joint Response Plan requested $934.5 million to assist 1.48 million refugees; nevertheless, persistent underfunding compels significant reductions in services (JRP, 2025). The governmental transition in Bangladesh in August 2024 resulted in ambiguous policy. Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus stated that Bangladesh can no longer accommodate refugees (Economic Times, 2024).

The Rohingya crisis is consistently portrayed through a binary analytical framework as an irreconcilable conflict between two opposed groups: Rohingya refugees seeking survival and Bangladeshi hosts protecting resources (Irom et al., 2022). This binary framing is prevalent in scholarly literature, policy documents, and news articles (Awny, 2019; Sheila Rai & Preeti Sharma, 2020). Such reductionist tactics obscure more than they reveal. Binary framings neglect the multitude of entities affecting conflict dynamics beyond refugees and hosts, such as humanitarian agencies, governmental bodies, armed factions, traditional authorities, regional states, and international benefactors (Ahammad et al., 2024; Awny, 2019; Sheila Rai & Preeti Sharma, 2020; Zahed, 2023). They often ignore the interrelations among challenges in the economic, social, political, security, and environmental domains that create reinforcing interconnected loops. Binary approaches mostly result in intervention tactics that address symptoms rather than the underlying structural flaws that precipitated the crisis. They perceive it as a mere binary dilemma, when the reality is significantly more intricate.

Although scholars are beginning to recognise the complexities of relationships between refugees and their hosts, rigorous analytical frameworks to clarify this complexity are still lacking. Brosché, Nilsson, and Sundberg (2023) proposed an advanced paradigm for comprehending the intricacies of civil warfare. Three primary aspects of complexity were identified: actor complexity (the existence of multiple

parties with divergent interests), issue complexity (the interconnection of various conflict causes across domains), and behavioural complexity (the evolution of conflict-related activities over time). Their framework has been effective in clarifying military conflicts but is not applied in refugee-host situations. Contemporary refugee studies concentrate on discrete elements such as economic impacts, environmental effects, or security concerns, neglecting their interconnections (Alam & Dutta, 2020; Babu, 2020). While scholars accept "complex dynamics" (Ansar & Md. Khaled, 2021, p. 12), complexity theory-based analytical frameworks are rare. The absence of comprehensive frameworks limits academic understanding and the development of effective solutions.

This study employs the complexity paradigm proposed by Brosché et al. (2023) to do an in-depth examination of the conflicts between the Rohingya and host populations. The study examines actor complexity by identifying major actors outside the refugee-host dichotomy, outlining diverse interests, and analysing power disparities. It examines the complexity of situations by analysing the interconnections among conflict drivers in the economic, social, political, security, and environmental domains and their mutual impacts. It analyses behavioural complexity by charting the shift from initial solidarity to current hostility. In principle, this broadens complexity theory from civil war to contexts involving refugees and host communities. This marks the first systematic use of the complexity approach in Cox's Bazar, employing empirical data from qualitative methods and secondary sources. The research also illustrates the ineffectiveness of binary methods and proposes strategies for addressing the inherent complexity of non-intervention procedures.

This paper proceeds as follows: the literature review establishes the foundation for understanding refugee-host conflicts, complexity theory, and the Rohingya situation, identifying the gaps that this research aims to address. The theoretical framework clarifies the relevance of the complexity model to refugee situations. The analysis and discussion commence by exploring actor complexity, acknowledging several stakeholder groups and power disparities that transcend conventional binary models. The subsequent research examines the complexity of the issue by delineating the interconnected drivers and never-ending loops. Third, it examines the evolution of behaviour over time, referred to as 'behavioural complexity'. The conclusion synthesises concepts and proposes avenues for future research to employ complexity thinking in the examination of long-term displacement.

Literature Review

This literature review establishes the scholarly foundation for understanding the dynamics between refugees and host communities in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, progressing from general theoretical frameworks to contextually relevant actual data. The study examines global refugee-host relations, including security, resource competitiveness, and conflict evolution. It then examines the Rohingya situation in Bangladesh, showing how established patterns evolve in this extended displacement context and stressing unique qualities that hinder conflict resolution. This analytical development shows limits in systematic complexity frameworks in refugee-host conflicts, establishing the stage for this study's contribution to multidimensional conflict dynamics in displacement circumstances.

- **Conflicts Between Refugees and Host Communities: Global Trends and Theoretical Foundations**

Research on refugee-host community relations has evolved from simplistic linear models that assumed inevitable conflict to more nuanced frameworks that recognise diverse outcomes shaped by structural factors, governmental policies, and temporal dynamics. Martin's (2005) research demonstrated that competition for environmental resources between refugees and host communities can lead to conflict;

however, it crucially showed that participatory resource management frameworks can transform competitive interactions into collaborative solutions. Subsequent research has been informed by this understanding, which posits that scarcity creates the conditions for conflict rather than determining the outcomes.

Conflicts over the security implications of refugee populations reveal fundamental differences in cause and evidence. Salehyan and Gleditsch (2006) claimed that refugee populations correlate with a higher likelihood of violence in the host countries, influenced by factors such as resource competition and ethnic mobilisation. Nonetheless, the authors acknowledged that the identified correlations could be affected by confounding variables, such as ethnic affiliations and regional instability, which predispose environments to both refugee influxes and violence, cautioning against making direct causal inferences from correlational patterns. Recent empirical research has substantially challenged established notions regarding security threats. Zhou and Shaver (2021) used geocoded data on global refugee populations from 1990 to 2018, finding little evidence that the presence of refugees provokes new conflicts; rather, it may inspire local development and decrease conflict.

The involvement of refugees in violence requires careful examination due to prevalent misconceptions. The POSVAR dataset by Gineste and Savun (2019) systemically records violence against refugees, showing that most cases involve refugees as victims rather than instigators of violence. Rüegger (2019) demonstrated through a cross-national analysis that refugees get involved in armed violence only under specific conditions, which are significantly contingent upon the political tensions and ethnic power relations in the host nations. These findings emphasise the necessity for inclusive measures by host governments towards citizens to prevent dangerous instability. A study conducted in Uganda demonstrated that when aid generates spillover effects, positive outcomes ensue (Zhou et al., 2023). Host communities next to substantial refugee settlements experienced better access to public schools, an increase in health clinics, and improved road infrastructure, with no indication of anti-refugee sentiment despite the significant refugee population.

Temporal dynamics are a crucial yet insufficiently theorised aspect of refugee-host relations. Studies on extended displacement have shown that intercommunal contacts typically evolve through certain phases rather than remaining static (Jacobsen, 2001; Loescher & Milner, 2013). Initial solidarity, typically rooted in humanitarian compassion or cultural connection, often evolves into frustration as displacement persists and resource pressures intensify. Jacobsen (2001) argued that this transition highlights the deficiencies of international support systems and "warehousing" approaches, leading to both refugee and host communities lacking sustainable livelihood choices (p. 3). Coniglio et al. (2023) empirically corroborated this temporal pattern in various refugee-hosting contexts. Their findings revealed an "asynchronous effect": refugee camps provoke significant increases in protests and social tensions over the first two years, corresponding with sudden population surges in host communities (p. 11). However, these conflicts subsequently diminish as refugees integrate into socio-economic systems, promoting growth through increased aggregate demand and public expenditure benefits.

The Rohingya crisis: Contextualising complexity in Cox's Bazar

The Rohingya crisis possesses unique characteristics that both mirror and contribute to global patterns in how refugees and host countries get along. Rahman (2024) argues that statelessness is the core cause of the problem, as Myanmar's ongoing refusal to grant citizenship creates an environment conducive to persecution, leading to displacement and hindering repatriation prospects. This legal ambiguity renders individuals vulnerable and reliant in manners that citizen refugee groups are not, significantly influencing the dynamics of conflicts in host nations. The magnitude and distinctiveness of environmental deterioration in Cox's Bazar exceed typical refugee-hosting situations, transforming

resource competition from a theoretical concern into a demonstrable disaster. Economic assessments measured a $5.33 million (22%) decline in the timber industry's surplus and a notable decrease in biodiversity (MOEF, BD et al., 2018). Habib and Roy Chowdhury (2023) assert that these documented impacts cultivate perceptions among host populations that governmental and humanitarian agencies persistently emphasise Rohingya needs over local welfare, intensifying hatred beyond the basic scarcity of resources. The interplay of prolonged displacement and climate susceptibility intensifies conventional refugee-host conflicts, forming what Neef et al. (2023) describe as a "conflict-climate-displacement nexus" (p. 242).

The conflicts are complex and impact more than merely the economy and the environment. They also influence security, demographics, and culture, all of which contribute to the pressure. Kamruzzaman et al. (2024) documented host community concerns on demographic marginalisation, observing that the Rohingya population exceeds the total populations of the Ukhiya and Teknaf subdistricts where the camps are located. Security concerns include both tangible risks and changed perceptions. Khan (2024) reported on drug trafficking networks operating from camps, violent clashes between armed factions (ARSA and RSO) in camp areas, and the forced trafficking of Rohingya women, leading to genuine insecurity for adjacent host communities. Macdonald et al.'s (2023) study revealed that members of the host community rarely interact with refugees, and when such interactions take place, they are predominantly negative. Moreover, their findings indicated that individuals were increasingly losing confidence in the government's capacity to address issues

The architecture of humanitarian aid significantly affects conflict dynamics in ways that global literature insufficiently explores. The 2025-26 Joint Response Plan is significantly underfunded, with just preliminary pledges. This indicates that services must be reduced, exacerbating competition for resources and survival (JRP, 2025). The inconsistency in humanitarian assistance is not merely supplementary; it serves as a crucial structural factor influencing local conflict intensity, demonstrating the effect of foreign actors' choices on community dynamics. Ansar and Khaled (2021) emphasised that the humanitarian agencies' concentrated response to refugee needs during the initial crisis phase, albeit operationally justifiable, resulted in notable disparities as host communities experiencing comparable poverty levels did not receive equivalent assistance.

Current literature acknowledges that relations between refugees and host communities involve complex processes but lacks comprehensive analytical frameworks to scrutinise this complexity. Research typically concentrates on isolated dimensions such as economic competition, environmental deterioration, or security issues, while neglecting the examination of how dynamics within one area induce tensions in others via interconnected loops. Research recognises various actors beyond refugees and hosts, yet it seldom investigates how their diverse interests and power imbalances influence the paths of conflict. Literature documents the chronological transition from solidarity to resistance but offers insufficient theoretical clarification for the systematic emergence of this pattern across varied situations.

Theoretical framework: Employing complexity approach in conflict analysis

The complex and enduring nature of the Rohingya-host community conflict requires an analytical framework that can capture its diverse and dynamic attributes. Brosché et al. (2023) conceptualise conflict complexity to analyse civil war, providing a robust and systematic framework for this examination. This framework comprises three interrelated components allowing systematic analysis of conflict dynamics.

'**Actor complexity**' denotes the number and variety of entities involved in a dispute, suggesting that an increased plurality of actors with differing interests and levels of power complicates conflict resolution (Brosché et al., 2023, p. 12). This encompasses more than only two groups (such as refugees and hosts) to illustrate the entire ecosystem of players. This includes state entities at various levels,

humanitarian organisations with diverse objectives, armed factions, community leaders (such as mahjis), and many sub-groups among both refugee and host communities. The '**issue complexity**' involves the intricate and interconnected attributes of the contested stakes. Brosché et al. (2023) argue that the intractability of issues depends on their prominence (the extent to which they are essential to a party's identity or survival), divisibility (their susceptibility to compromise), and totality (the degree to which they are perceived in zero-sum terms). In Cox's Bazar, issues range from critical and inseparable matters such as citizenship and security to economic and resource conflicts that, while less significant, remain highly contentious. These issues are interrelated and intricately linked. '**Behavioural complexity**' examines the evolution of conflict behaviours across time and among different individuals. They can oscillate between collaboration and conflict (Brosché et al., 2023). This element is crucial for understanding the evolution of relationships in Cox's Bazar from initial solidarity to deep-seated tension, together with the significant behavioural differences within the host and refugee populations shaped by economic status, gender, and age. The complexity framework was developed for analysing civil wars, although its core components are especially pertinent to the persistent refugee context, which exhibits similar characteristics of several interrelated actors, intricate issues, and fluctuating behaviours.

The framework's analytical strength resides in its examination of the intersections among these aspects, rather than considering them in isolation. The diversity of actors affects which issues become important and how they are related to each other. Interconnections between issues affect how behaviour changes over time, since interconnected loops may increase or decrease conflicts. Changes in behaviour modify the groups of actors and the balance of power. This integrated method allows us to go beyond binary frames that hide the many sides of refugee-host conflicts and provide a systematic analysis that shows dynamics that reductionist approaches may not see.

Methods

This study examined refugee-host community conflict in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, using a qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews, key informant interviews, and document analysis were used to study both populations' relationship dynamics.

Purposive sampling ensured varied stakeholder viewpoints throughout the investigation. The 40 interviews included 29 in-depth interviews (IDIs) with Rohingya refugees and host community members and 11 key informant interviews (KIIs) with humanitarian workers, religious leaders, camp leaders (Mahji), and camp administrators. To reflect refugee and host diversity, the sample method prioritised gender balance, camp locations, and leadership roles. Snowball sampling helped reach marginalised groups like women and women who would otherwise be excluded from studies. Fieldwork took place in Cox's Bazar in February–March 2025. Rohingya-speaking interpreters with research ethics and cultural sensitivity performed semi-structured interviews. To contextualise interview findings within refugee response institutional frameworks, humanitarian policies, programme reports, coordination meeting minutes, and policy communications were examined. The data analysis identified conflict drivers, stakeholder interests, and intercommunal dynamic patterns using systematic thematic coding. The analysis examined actor complexity, including actor variety, opposing interests, relational dynamics, and problem features, including salience, divisibility, and totality, using Brosché et al.'s (2023) complexity paradigm. Interviews were translated from Rohingya to Bangla to English. Researchers from INGOs and NGOs working on the Rohingya response since 2017 checked transcripts. These were then categorised by resource competitiveness, security concerns, societal divisions, humanitarian governance, and conflict-related behaviour.

The study followed humanitarian research ethics, including informed consent, confidentiality, trauma-informed techniques, and voluntary involvement. Displacement can elicit trauma; therefore, interview methods were designed to reduce pain while preserving participants' dignity and autonomy. The Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) in Bangladesh authorised refugee camp research. All participants gave informed consent, and oral consent processes were used as needed to assure comprehension and compliance, regardless of literacy or culture.

The study recognises qualitative study limitations. The results reflect the conditions from February to March 2025, while conflict dynamics are changing. The sample includes refugee and host community viewpoints, although it is a temporal snapshot rather than a longitudinal analysis. However, the rigorous sampling procedure and analytical precision give solid empirical underpinnings for comprehending Cox's Bazar refugee-host conflicts.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of tensions between Rohingya refugees and local Bangladeshi communities in Cox's Bazar confirms that the conflict is not a simple refugee-host dichotomy but a complex adaptive system. Applying Brosche's complexity framework (Brosche, Nilsson, & Sundberg, 2023), the findings demonstrate that actors navigate structural constraints which enforce zero-sum competition, where fluctuations in humanitarian aid and political status quickly destabilise security and livelihood across all involved groups. The section is structured around actor, issue, and behaviour complexity, explicitly answering the research questions regarding conflicting parties and root drivers.

I. Actor complexity: A multi-layered governance system

The complexity model defines actors as the number and type of warring parties engaged in the conflict and should not be restricted to governments and rebels but instead include other actors that partake in the conflict (Brosché et al., 2023, pp. 144–145). Although the model focused on the actors directly involved in the actual conflict to make the model tighter and increase its utility (Brosché et al., 2023, p. 145), this research focuses on identifying the actors who have some stake in the conflict dynamics of the on-the-ground situation. In this analysis, actors or stakeholders include individuals, groups, and institutions or organisations that are either contributing to tensions and conflict or being affected by them in a positive or negative way (thus focusing on the behaviour component of the triangle), as well as those engaged in dealing with conflict.

National actors: The policy architects

The Bangladesh government, as the ultimate authority, demonstrates a profound discrepancy between stated humanitarian pledges and institutional execution. The appointment of the interim government under Muhammad Yunus in August 2024 (Economic Times, 2024), 2024) and the subsequent establishment of a High Representative for Rohingya Affairs signalled an effort to professionalise the state's approach. Nevertheless, the foundational encampment policy remains the primary structural constraint, severely limiting refugee mobility and formally prohibiting legal employment (Hossain, 2024; HRW, 2022). This policy framework, which regards the refugee presence as temporary despite eight years of protracted displacement, avoids investments in long-term solutions or integration. Consequently, the prohibition of economic integration transforms potential economic complementarity into a direct zero-sum rivalry for limited informal opportunities.

This policy architecture illustrates overarching trends observed in the governance of prolonged displacement. A recent comparative study on migrant governance identifies three enduring characteristics:

evolving actor landscapes, heightened fragmentation in policy and legislation, and the resurgence of national control narratives as essential governing components (Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022). Bangladesh's strategy embodies the "renationalisation narrative", which aims to re-establish state authority over intrinsically intricate multi-actor displacement scenarios; yet such efforts at simplifying frequently intensify rather than alleviate underlying tensions (2022, p. 1).

Humanitarian & international actors: The unintentional governors

Humanitarian organisations are embedded components of the political economy, functioning as key influencers of conflict intensity rather than neutral service providers. The 2024-2025 funding situation, which secured merely 16 per cent of the Joint Response Plan requirements, demonstrates this pivotal role (JRP, 2025; UNOCHA, 2025). This shortfall, compounded by the suspension of U.S. aid driven by extraterritorial political considerations, exposed power imbalances where prominent bilateral donors dictate resource allocation detached from on-the-ground requirements. The resulting aid dependence framework, in which refugees rely exclusively on assistance while host populations receive insufficient developmental support, fosters the perceived injustice that acts as the principal catalyst for host animosity.

This structural role illustrates wider trends in humanitarian political economy. Scholars contend that prolonged displacement scenarios convert humanitarian organisations into de facto governing bodies, with decisions regarding aid distribution directly influencing the conflict dynamics between refugees and host communities (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; Ramsay, 2020). Research also indicates that asymmetric aid distribution, which favours refugees over host populations, leads to zero-sum competition (Harrell-Bond, 2002). The anticipated funding collapse in 2024-2025 exemplifies how reductions in services transform assistance into contested resources, thereby exacerbating tensions instead of alleviating them.

Camp-level actors: The on-the-ground power brokers

Authority within the camps is highly complex and fragmented. Armed factions – chiefly the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), exert coercive dominance through violence, extortion, and involuntary conscription. The security situation deteriorated sharply before the truce: killings rose from 22 in 2021 to 90 in 2023, and abductions skyrocketed from approximately 100 in 2021 to over 700 in the first nine months of 2023 (Fortify Rights, 2025; ICG, 2023). The November 2024 truce consolidated formerly rival organisations against an external threat, the Myanmar Arakan Army, fuelling host community apprehensions of cross-border insurgency. This generates a security paradox where groups purporting to safeguard refugee interests pose major risks to refugee welfare. Mahjis (designated refugee community leaders) act as influential middlemen, controlling aid distribution, camp governance, and dispute resolution. However, allegations of partiality, corruption, and co-optation with armed groups compromise their validity, leading to the articulation of alternative community systems of influence. One Mahji articulated a desire for independence, noting:

"When you (the Bangladeshi interviewer) were oppressed in 1971, you battled for your freedom and independence. It is the same for us now. So, if they (armed groups) demand 'soldiers' to battle, why could we not send them?"

The dynamics indicate a significant paradox of governance legitimacy in prolonged refugee contexts. Humanitarian systems that impose dependency and require refugee self-organisation generate legitimacy vacuums that armed actors strategically exploit. This research builds on existing scholarship that documents the tensions between imposed governance and emergent refugee organisation (Feldman,

2018; Hyndman, 2000) to explain the specific mechanisms by which restrictive governance architectures foster conditions for violent authority contestation. The analysis illustrates how governance structures unintentionally foster conditions for their own challenge, converting limited refugee agency into avenues for the legitimisation of armed groups and potential security threats.

Refugee & host communities: Non-monolithic constituencies

Economic stratification generates divisions within both groups that frequently overshadow the categorical refugee-host distinction in defining individual circumstances and actions. Business proprietors form the Bangladeshi host community, who benefit from camp economies (via land leases and employment of labour), generally exhibit accommodating attitudes and endorse humanitarian efforts. Conversely, day labourers who compete directly with refugees for informal work exhibit feelings of hostility and vulnerability. A host community day labourer remarked,

"The wealthy here benefit from refugees through business. For us workers, they only bring competition and lower wages. We share nothing but poverty."

Conversely, the economic elite refugees who established businesses or secured NGO employment face distinct constraints compared to vulnerable, aid-dependent populations. Similarly, generational disparities influence risk tolerance, with young individuals facing unemployment and limited prospects exhibiting greater vulnerability to recruitment by armed groups and illicit trade. A Majhi (appointed Rohingya leader) confirmed this erosion of authority, noting that

"Young people have access to money via contrabands, smuggling, etc., which gives them a financial boost, and they consider themselves more 'knowledgeable' than the older people. Older individuals, by contrast, prioritise stability."

This heterogeneity demonstrates that material conditions and livelihood security, rather than fixed identity categories, are the primary determinants of actor interest and subsequent behaviour. The encampment policy originally facilitated coordinated humanitarian protection and swift stabilisation; however, it gradually entrenched assistance dependency, restricted refugees from the formal labour market, and unwittingly promoted informal economies and instability within camps.

II. Issues at stake: Interconnected Factors of Conflict

The complexity concept spotlights how conflicts involve multiple, interconnected issues across different dimensions, and the complexity of an issue-influence depends on its "salience, divisibility, and totality" (Brosché et al., 2023, p. 151). As such, the issues that exist in the host-Rohingya community can be multidimensional, interlinked, and complex in nature. Conflict drivers are categorised into three interrelated domains: humanitarian needs, economic competitiveness, and identity/status stratification. Changes in one domain rapidly induce modifications in the other two. These issue clusters demonstrate considerable salience (affecting survival, livelihood, and belonging), low divisibility (resistant to compromise solutions), and complete totality (impacting all aspects of everyday life), characteristics that make the conflict highly intractable.

Humanitarian dependency: How aid fluctuations influence conflict

The crisis has evolved into a prolonged dependency for almost 1.28 million refugees. This is exacerbated by governmental regulations that hinder their self-sufficiency. When assistance was

withdrawn, refugees resorted to drastic methods for survival, including accepting employment that compensated below the market rate and engaging in illicit activities. A woman from Camp 22 stated,

"When food aid stopped coming regularly, families had nothing. People took any work, no matter the conditions. Some young men joined armed groups offering money. What choice exists when children are hungry?"

Such desperate tactics immediately exacerbate competition for resources and reinforce the host's perception of migrants as criminals and liabilities.This dynamic demonstrates how prolonged displacement establishes structural 'dependency traps'. Refugees in camp settings frequently develop informal economic systems in the absence of formal opportunities (Oka,2011; Werker, 2007). Restrictive regulations, absence of legal documentation, and restricted access to financial services systematically limit refugee self-reliance (Al-Mahaidi, 2021; Jacobsen, 2002; Kaiser, 2006; Lenner & Turner, 2019), resulting in a 'dependency trap' rather than facilitating temporary protection.

Economic competition: How policy transforms potential synergy into zero-sum rivalry

Policy limits transform what ought to be a mutually advantageous transaction into a contest with no winners. Due to their inability to work legally, over one million working-age refugees are compelled to engage in informal labour markets, where they directly compete with host community members with lesser wages (Khan, 2024; Ullah et al., 2021). Traditional livelihoods, such as agriculture and fishing, have been diminished due to the limitations of Rohingya camps and increased competition. Hill-dwelling groups dependent on agriculture have experienced a loss of income due to the construction of refugee camps in their areas. Fishermen on the Naaf River face restrictions due to boat owners hiring Rohingya labourers at lower wages. The host community reports that the situation has hindered women's employment opportunities. Rohingya women are employed for domestic tasks due to their willingness to accept lower wages compared to workers from affluent families. Women from the host community previously cultivated cucumber, tamarind, ginger, pineapple, watermelon, and betel leaf on government land; however, this area is now inhabited by Rohingya people. Relative deprivation of perception, that refugees receive monthly assistance while their hometowns lack sufficient funds for development, incites hostility within the host community, rather than genuine deprivation.

This pattern of policy-induced competition exemplifies broader dynamics in protracted displacement where 'resource competition' becomes a primary conflict driver. Studies indicate that labour market exclusion compels refugees to engage in informal sectors, leading to direct competition with vulnerable host populations (Del Carpio & Wagner, 2015; Fallah et al., 2019). Similarly, considerable wage suppression and job displacement especially impact low-skilled workers, women, and youth within informal economies (Malaeb & Wahba, 2018; Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022). Research indicates that refugees displace host workers within informal labour markets, heightening competition for low-wage jobs and lowering labour costs (Altındağ et al., 2020). This policy-driven competition fosters host resentment, particularly when hosts perceive competition in the labour market.

The superstructure of statelessness and security

Statelessness, perpetuated by Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law, constitutes the fundamental structural condition exacerbating all other issues (Rahman, 2024; Rusconi, 2023). Lacking legal status precludes employment opportunities, denies legal protections, and presents an indefinite future. Research identified reciprocal stereotyping mechanisms that dehumanise both groups: hosts employ derogatory language such as "baby producers", "disease carriers", and "violent criminals", while refugees fear exploitation, complicating their collaboration (Wadud, 2020, p. 23). Reports of Rohingyas being hired as

'contract killers' exacerbate security concerns, despite a lack of evidence. This breeds fear and mistrust, hindering communication. A member of the host community explicitly stated,

"Rohingyas and Mogs (local term for Myanmar Buddhists) are identical. They are not different."

This assertion connects Rohingya refugees with their persecutors, suggesting that all are malevolent. The militarisation of camps heightens security issues. Following the November 2024 truce, host communities expressed concern that the consolidated armed factions may launch attacks from Bangladesh, thus including Bangladesh in Myanmar's civil conflict. This apprehension feeds distrust, resulting in heightened limitations and surveillance. The magnitude of the illicit economy, with Cox's Bazar representing nearly 50% of methamphetamine seizures over three years, indicates that the camps are critical to the security landscape (IIISS, 2023). The security paradox emerges when efforts to regulate armed groups through blanket restrictions on refugees lead to collective punishment of populations, while neglecting issues of statelessness, inadequate legal avenues, and insufficient humanitarian assistance that draw desperate young people to armed factions.

Interconnections and never-ending loops

The advancements observed between 2024 and 2025 illustrate how the complexities of issues can mutually reinforce one another via feedback loops. Decreases in help (*humanitarian concern*) compel refugees to accept perilous employment (*economic concern*), so perpetuating host prejudices that refugees are liabilities and criminals (*identity worry*), which subsequently diminishes public support for humanitarian assistance (*returning to the humanitarian concern*). This self-reinforcing process illustrates that initial challenges proliferate across several complexities, exacerbating the overall conflict rather than remaining confined to a single domain. Following the truce, armed factions unite, instilling greater fear among the host community populace regarding enduring conflict and transnational violence (*security concern*). This hinders economic collaboration and the establishment of relationships that could mitigate conflicts stemming from economic and social challenges. These issue loops generate self-perpetuating dynamics in which initial problems proliferate to other places, exacerbating the overall conflict rather than remaining confined to a single-issue area.

Large-scale humanitarian aid and sectoral coordination were able to provide lifesaving help and ease health and nutrition crises in the short term. However, ongoing funding shortages and strict aid rules have made it harder for refugees to get an education, learn new skills, and become self-sufficient, which has led to more competition for resources with hosts (JRP, 2025; The Daily Star, 2023).

III. Behaviour complexity: Navigating a constrained system

Behavioural patterns demonstrate significant variety, are temporally dynamic, and challenge the concept of fixed inter-group hostility, indicating that behaviours are primarily shaped by structural constraints and contextual evaluations.

Temporal shifts

In 2017, host communities exhibited a welcoming attitude towards refugees; currently, they display hostility. The local community, despite facing poverty, provided refugees fleeing violence with shelter, food, and support (Ansar & Md. Khaled, 2021). The kindness diminished as individuals were required to move out their residences for extended periods, leading to a deterioration of the situation. The increase observed between 2024 and 2025 can be attributed to the financial crisis, new displacements, and

the dynamics of armed groups, as indicated by interviews with host communities. Following the initial acceptance of migrants, members of the host community are expressing frustration and advocating for restrictions or repatriation.

This trend aligns with global patterns in refugee hosting. Research on displacement indicates that "intense feelings of solidarity cannot be sustained over the long term; in most refugee-hosting countries, generosity fatigue sets in as crises become intractable and resources dwindle" (Banulescu-Bogdan, 2022, p. 14). Humanitarian interventions in emergencies establish path dependencies that may facilitate or obstruct long-term integration, as evidenced by the situation in Cox's Bazar. Eight years post-displacement, both communities continue to experience crises stemming from inadequate integrated emergency response and sustainable development initiatives.

The behaviour of refugees evolved over time in the absence of reintegration or acceptance. Unemployed youth with limited opportunities enlist in armed groups. Resource constraints led families to reduce expenditures and accept inequitable employment conditions. As legal funding sources diminished, certain refugees resorted to drug smuggling and minor criminal activities. A woman from Camp 22 stated,

"At first, we only thanked Allah for safety. Now after so many years with no hope of return or future here, people become desperate. Young men especially, as they see no path forward."

This transition from gratitude to desperation illustrates the concept of 'temporal proximity effects' as defined by displacement scholars: war exposure is a more distant experience that may diminish over time, whereas displacement-related stressors are immediate and persistent sources of stress that refugees have limited ability to influence (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017, p. 134). The ongoing state of deprivation, lacking feasible avenues for progress, results in persistent psychological distress that is reflected in transformed behaviours.

Spectrum of behavioural expressions: cooperation to confrontation

As identified, despite significant tensions, most people articulate their anger in non-violent manners, demonstrating their ability to regulate their conduct despite experiencing anger. Cooperative behaviours persist across multiple domains: economic collaboration through shared labour arrangements in agriculture or fishing between refugees and host community members; informal employment of refugees by businesses within the host community despite legal constraints; and cultural exchange via shared religious practices and community events. These collaborative actions illustrate that disparities in identification do not obstruct interaction when material conditions and opportunities promote mutual advantage. Local mediation and dispute settlement mechanisms, encompassing traditional elders, religious leaders, and specifically Mahjis, effectively prevent escalation of conflicts.

This restraint, despite increased tensions, challenges deterministic narratives that suggest displacement inevitably leads to violence. Recent cross-national research indicates that the arrival of refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs) does not inherently compromise social cohesion within host communities, nor do host communities consistently exhibit hostility towards displaced people upon their arrival (Myers et al., 2024). The characteristics of host communities at the time of refugee arrival, specifically economic conditions, governance quality, and state policy responses, can shape the relationship between displacement and social cohesion. Local conflict mediation projects, however successful in resolving specific disagreements and maintaining initial community cohesion, have faced challenges in tackling deeper structural causes and extensive power imbalances stemming from national policy limitations and prolonged displacement.

Conclusion

This study shows that binary analytical frameworks cannot address the complexity of refugee-host tensions in Cox's Bazar. This study uses Brosché et al.'s (2023) complexity paradigm to evaluate the Rohingya issue, finding actor plurality, problem interconnectivity, and behavioural evolution. Oversimplified refugee-host dichotomies ignore key factors that influence whether displacement fosters cooperation or enmity.

Empirical evidence from three complexity categories shows interrelated conflict trajectories. The complexity of actors shows that the refugee and host populations, viewed as one, are actually very different related to wealth, age, and geography. Affluent host community members earning from land leases have quite different objectives from disadvantaged day workers seeking jobs. NGOs exploit protracted dislocation, but most humanitarian aid recipients seek stability through other means. Humanitarian groups are key political and economic actors, and their financing decisions affect local conflict severity. Significant service cuts in 2025–26 increased competition for resources and the struggle for survival. While armed factions rule regions, government limits and international financial swings produce power imbalances at various levels. Host communities have little control over structural variables that affect them.

The intricacy of the situation shows that humanitarian dependency, economic rivalry, environmental degradation, identity issues, and security difficulties all contribute to violence. Changing one domain quickly changes others, causing a cascade of reactions that worsen the issue. Humanitarian aid budget cuts make meeting basic necessities difficult, forcing refugees to accept meagre wages. This behaviour boosts economic competitiveness and perpetuates refugee criminal stereotypes, prolonging dependent policies. Deforestation destroys local communities, and government limitations decrease wages, forcing host community workers to migrate. Significant salience, little divisibility, and perfect wholeness indicate intractable issues in these partnerships. Behavioural complexity shows the host community's fall from solidarity to animosity over eight years of displacement. This trajectory is influenced by unchanging structural factors, not local community strategy. Initial collaboration's endurance depends on prolonged displacement without alternatives, poor international burden-sharing, and political measures that inhibit integration. The change in behaviour shows how structural pressures affect local relationships, since resource depletion reduces collaboration.

These findings affect our understanding of forced displacement conflicts. Refugees do not necessarily cause conflict, according to this study. However, integration strategies, humanitarian resource distribution, and structural factors like statelessness determine whether displacement is mutually beneficial or zero-sum. Instead of viewing refugee-host tensions as demographic pressures, this emphasises how institutional design and international commitments shape disputes. When Rohingyas are relocated for long periods without burden-sharing, host groups may lose solidarity. This suggests that addressing root problems rather than symptoms in the region is necessary to prevent conflict escalation. This study makes three contributions. It extends complexity theory from civil war contexts to refugee-host dynamics, indicating that frameworks used to analyse conflicting parties must be significantly altered for scenarios where humanitarian actors, structural policy limitations, and international funding fluctuations are the main sources of conflict. This study is the first to employ the Brosché et al. technique in a large refugee environment to identify actor interests, issue complexity, and behavioural changes. The analysis shows that binary approaches in policy and practice fail to handle the intricacies of refugee-host relations.

Future research should examine different possibilities from this analysis. Comparative complexity framework studies in varied protracted refugee circumstances may reveal displacement-specific dynamics

rather than context-specific aspects. Longitudinal research on complexity factors during migration may uncover important moments when intervention avoids solidarity decrease. Researching policy differences among states with similar refugee populations would reveal whether institutional frameworks promote sustainable cohabitation. The political economy of humanitarian financing fluctuations may explain the gap between international pledges and real needs. Refugees and host community members can co-research contextually relevant complexity frameworks that blend cultural knowledge systems with scholarly concepts in participatory action research.

To reduce refugee-host community disputes, practitioners, policymakers, and humanitarian players must change their analytical approaches. Due to conflict dynamics miscalculations, binary framework interventions often fail. We need a comprehensive complexity study of actor heterogeneity, issue interconnections, and temporal changes to progress. Organisations that provide humanitarian aid must recognise that there are structural factors that affect war outcomes. They must realise that their money decisions greatly impact community cooperation or discord. Statelessness, inadequate integration policies, and insufficient international cost-sharing must be addressed by policymakers. Distribution alone cannot treat symptoms. Rohingya shows that displacement does not always lead to violence. Systemic modifications must promote reciprocal advantages rather than competition that causes communal loss to maintain early unity. The international community must address the root causes of persistent displacement to avoid long-term conflict.

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