

# INTEGRATED COMMUNITY AND ADOLESCENT ENGAGEMENT IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

MEANINGFUL ACTION IN PROGRAMMING IN COX'S BAZAR, BANGLADESH



JOINT CASE STUDY BY THE ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT AND PARTICIPATION  
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## BACKGROUND

The Rohingya people have endured a long history of discrimination and persecution in Myanmar, with decades of forced population movements from Rakhine State to Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. For instance, more than 200,000 people were forcibly displaced in 1977-1978, and about 250,000 in 1991.<sup>1</sup> In August 2017 alone, approximately 725,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh following a campaign of ethnic cleansing, and more refugees followed.

Today, the Cox's Bazar district hosts the world's largest concentration of refugees. More than 889,700 refugees live in 34 camps in the Ukhiya and Teknaf Upazilas. More than half are children under age 18.<sup>2</sup>

The refugees' arrival has put a strain on Bangladesh's limited resources. As of 2016, Bangladesh had a poverty rate of 24.3 percent and an extreme poverty rate of nearly 13 percent, and Cox's Bazar district is one of the poorest areas in the country.<sup>3</sup> This has led to increasing tensions between the host community and the refugee community.

While social development has steadily improved in Cox's Bazar since 2017, older adolescents and youth — especially girls, adolescents and youth with disabilities, and those who are unaccompanied or separated

from their families — continue to experience multiple vulnerabilities.<sup>4</sup> For instance, before the COVID-19 pandemic response closed Temporary Learning Centres (TLCs) in early 2020, most adolescents aged 15-18 were not enrolled. This left them with learning gaps and limited opportunities for skills development. Only 3 percent of girls in that age group attended TLCs four times a week, compared to 28 percent of boys.<sup>5</sup>

The main barriers to education stem from gender, social and cultural norms. Girls drop out of school to get married or due to conservative social norms, while boys drop out to search for work. Adolescents face other risks, such as child labour and other forms of trafficking. In 2020-2021, measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic difficulties exacerbated these risks and created additional accessibility barriers to education for adolescents.

Other factors also constrain Rohingya adolescents' (aged 10-19) social and civic engagement. For example, low literacy levels and language barriers can prevent adolescents and their families from engaging in host community programmes.<sup>6</sup> In addition, parents have limited knowledge and skills for positive parenting (that is, creating a protective and nurturing environment for adolescents), which can impact adolescent development.

Even though these factors are known, young people aged 15-24 often remain the most underserved population in the Cox's Bazar refugee camps.<sup>7</sup> This points to a critical need for United Nations agencies and partners to work together to highlight adolescents' vulnerability and work to meet their needs.

## MEANINGFUL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION OF ADOLESCENTS

At the start of the humanitarian crisis, UNICEF Bangladesh established a strong emergency response with a field presence, partnerships, coordination and work with the Government and other partners. Through a Communicating with Communities Working Group (CWC WG), people-centered approaches have been a cornerstone of social mobilization and community engagement interventions.

### ADOLESCENT PROGRAMMING BY UNICEF BANGLADESH AND ITS PARTNERS AIMED TO:

- Increase adolescents' access to key life-saving information, essential services and feedback mechanisms.
- Improve their vocational skills and work opportunities.
- Raise their confidence and awareness of key issues.
- Develop their capacities to meaningfully engage in community decision-making and action.
- Strengthen relationships between Rohingya and host community adolescents.

UNICEF recognized the importance of addressing the unique needs and vulnerabilities of adolescents in both host communities and refugee camps. Multiple sectors worked together to offer integrated, adolescent-centred programming and participation activities, implemented mainly through the Education and Child Protection sections. This included collaborations with Nutrition; Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH); Communication for Development (C4D); and Communication, Advocacy and Partnerships (CAP).

## METHODOLOGY

UNICEF and its partners began most of their programming with adolescents in 2018. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic reached Cox's Bazar in May 2020, activities and services were classified into three categories — critical, essential and non-essential — in coordination with the Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG). The Government of Bangladesh and the Office of the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner (RRRC) allowed only essential service delivery in both the camps and the host communities. This meant that many regular UNICEF and partner programming activities were halted, while others were adjusted to support the COVID-19 public health emergency response.

The restrictions imposed to respond to the COVID-19 crisis led to secondary impacts on the refugee and host communities, such as increased violence against children of all ages, domestic violence, child abuse, home-based corporal punishment, and mental health and psychosocial concerns. Many adolescents faced an increased threat of child labour. Several of the existing interventions were redirected and adjusted to address these impacts.

This case study highlights five intersecting community engagement programmes in Cox's Bazar, implemented by UNICEF and its partners with adolescent participation, both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic response.

Today, many of the activities continue and some are expanding, and they inform other current and future programming for and with adolescent refugees and host community members.

## MULTIPURPOSE CHILD AND ADOLESCENT CENTRES PROVIDE SAFE SPACES FOR MULTISECTORAL SERVICES AND LEARNING

Attention to adolescents has evolved since 2017, when the Child Protection team set up clubs in community spaces for adolescents and youth to meet, make friends and express their concerns, as part of its humanitarian response. These adolescent groups soon moved into more formal child-friendly spaces in the camps. However, many young people found that they had unique needs that were not being met at the child-centric spaces, especially for essential services such as menstrual health, nutrition, literacy, numeracy, leadership training and vocational skills.

In response, UNICEF and its partners set up Multipurpose Child and Adolescent Centres (MPCs) that serve as one-stop hubs for young people to access services. These services include psychosocial support, case management, community-based child protection, life skills development, foundational skill development (literacy and numeracy), and vocational education and training (VET).

Young people register to participate in the MPCs and go through a consultation and screening process, which enables UNICEF and its partners to assess their interests, availability and educational levels. The process is essential for proper placement in the MPCs, which provide both formal and non-formal learning and services. All MPC teachers and instructors are trained in psychosocial support (PSS), case identification and referral services.

As part of an integrated approach, teachers deliver life skills modules to adolescents and interested caregivers in parallel sessions (see box). These last about three months and include PSS content to address the psychosocial issues that adolescents may

## LIFE SKILLS MODULES IN COX'S BAZAR

Taught in sessions divided by age and gender

- Core Life Skills\*
- Health, Nutrition and Hygiene Management
- Child Rights and Protection
- Environment Awareness and Disaster Risk Reduction
- Leadership and Empowerment

\* Core life skills are knowledge and skills that individuals require to live a healthy life, such as how to act responsibly, communicate effectively, make decisions, solve problems, take initiative and have control over one's own life.

develop in response to their experiences. The teaching aims to reduce protection risks, challenge harmful practices and norms, and encourage adolescents' empowerment and participation. The sessions offer opportunities for adolescents to develop their networks, increase their knowledge and acquire leadership abilities.

UNICEF and its partners developed the adolescent life skills modules for Cox's Bazar through a consultative process with adolescent girls and boys, caregivers, service providers, key informants and others working on adolescent-related projects. This process helped ensure that the skills-building modules were relevant for local participants.

For monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of the MPCs, the UNICEF Cox's Bazar field office established a regular monthly monitoring system to track new and ongoing MPC activities, MPC functionality, enrollment rates and service provision. UNICEF Bangladesh and partners — including programme specialists, programme focal points, United Nations Volunteers (UNVs), community volunteers and other local actors — regularly monitored the MPC programmes in the refugee camps and host communities, including to monitor adolescent development and participation.

## MULTIPURPOSE CHILD AND ADOLESCENT CENTRES\*

- 136** Number of MPCs established by UNICEF's Child Protection Section
- 51,191** Adolescents in camps and host communities who received integrated child protection and education services (28,464 girls and 22,727 boys)
- 25%** Percentage of host community members among those receiving services

\*As of July 2021

One finding has been that adolescents said they felt more supported after accessing the services and activities in the MPCs. They cited their participation in educational opportunities, skills training, opportunities to express their opinions, community engagement activities and 'green' environmental actions. Many added that this support helped them to lead more structured lives.

To ensure adolescent involvement and control over changes to their routines and activities, UNICEF developed protocols to provide adolescents with meaningful opportunities to suggest changes and participate in the design of MPC spaces and project interventions. For example, UNICEF engaged adolescents in decisions when required changes to the MPCs' physical spaces impacted their activities — such as when they lost outdoor play spaces when buildings needed to expand in size to house additional learning activities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, UNICEF altered its MPC activities. In one case, to support adolescents' continued learning, UNICEF and the members of the Youth Working Group (YWG)<sup>8</sup> in Cox's Bazar adapted UNICEF's Adolescent Kit for Innovation and Expression for individual use.<sup>9</sup> Activities were self-administered by adolescents, at home or through small Adolescent Club meetings. Implementing partners said that the activities proved to be an efficient way to reach more girls as well as adolescents with disabilities.

Monthly M&E of the MPCs was adapted to pandemic conditions using software platforms as their main modality.<sup>10</sup> Still, programmatic and field visits were able to continue throughout the COVID-19 response, with adherence to restrictions set by the Government and the RRRC.

## ADOLESCENT RADIO LISTENER CLUBS ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION AND INVOLVEMENT

Working with established adolescent groups and developing new ones, UNICEF has supported 283 Adolescent Radio Listener Clubs (ARLCs) across Rohingya camps and host communities since 2018, in partnership with Bangladesh Betar, Radio Naf 99.2 FM, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and the Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts (BITA).

### Active members of ARLCs, as of July 2020

	Camps	Host community	Total
<b>Adolescent girls</b>	1,875	2,370	<b>4,245</b>
<b>Adolescent boys</b>	1,250	1,580	<b>2,830</b>

Often meeting as part of Adolescent Club meetings or at the child-friendly centres, the listening clubs provide a safe, participatory space to promote social interaction between adolescent girls and boys, stimulate discussion about their concerns, encourage solidarity and inspire hope for a better future. Each club has a facilitator and approximately 25-30 adolescent members, who meet regularly to listen to radio programmes, exchange information and discuss challenges they face in everyday life and in their communities.

ARLC facilitators are adolescents trained by UNICEF and the implementing partner agencies in leadership, communication and life skills. The young facilitators lead the club, coordinate the members to gather, collect their feedback on the radio shows, share it with the radio partners, and work as social change agents in their communities.



Sofira is a bright and outspoken 17-year-old girl. In 2017, she started attending radio listener clubs with girls her age. Since then, she has learned about a wide range of topics, including child marriage, cyclone preparation, hygiene promotion and how to protect her family from COVID-19 infection.

UNICEF designs support guides to help ARLC facilitators, with information about the weekly topic, talking points, key takeaways and the feedback sheet. The feedback helps UNICEF and its partners gather information about the relevance and accessibility of the discussions and radio programmes. By analyzing this feedback, UNICEF and its partners have been able to develop more relevant edutainment content to build adolescents' capacities to actively engage in their communities.

In addition to feedback, ARLC participants jointly seek solutions or plan initiatives to address the challenges they identify. The discussions and actions have helped adolescents to build a sense of ownership in personal and community development and, in turn, to be empowered to act as agents of change. Some of the issues adolescents have tackled in the ARLCs include child marriage, gender-based violence, cyclone preparedness, good health and hygiene practices, and how to protect their families from COVID-19 infection.

To form the ARLCs, UNICEF and its partners worked closely with Imams (religious leaders) and Majhis (community leaders) in the Rohingya camps. With their proactive support, parents and caregivers more readily gave their consent for girl adolescents to participate in the radio listener clubs. The leaders also supported club members through the COVID-19 pandemic until today to continue their ARLC sessions, as well as in adolescent-led sensitization events and campaigns.

## A JOINT VENTURE

The ARLCs listen to radio shows are produced in partnership with Bangladesh Betar and Community Radio Naf. The national public broadcaster — through the Cox's Bazar Communicating with Communities (CwC) working group<sup>11</sup> — consolidates them and makes them available for download on the Shongjog website, a national multi-stakeholder platform for communicating with communities.<sup>12</sup> The UNICEF partner BBC Media Action then releases the shows through the website's 'Listen Again' section, with topic-specific guides in English and Bangla.

The ARLC programme served as a key innovation in reaching adolescents and community members. It established a trusted source of information, where before there were no such sources. The club meetings empowered adolescents to contribute to positive behaviour change in their communities. Monitoring of the programme showed that adolescents' involvement in the clubs helped reduce their vulnerability to child marriage, gender-based violence and other harmful practices.

During the COVID-19 response, for example, the listener clubs disseminated key lifesaving and protection messages. This was combined with

**“ I go home and share what I learn with my parents. Each time I teach them something new, some useful information, my parents thank me!**

— Bahar, ARLC participant



Adolescents perform a play for the community on the negative effects of child marriage.

other communication channels, such as radio and mosque loudspeaker announcements. In 2020, a radio listenership survey found that about 90 percent of respondents heard the COVID-19 messages on the radio, while 99 percent stated they wanted more information on COVID-19 through the radio.

### ADOLESCENTS AND COMMUNITY ENGAGE THROUGH CULTURAL PROGRAMMES

From June 2018 to 2019, UNICEF and its partner, the Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts (BITA),<sup>13</sup> supported cultural programmes in 23 Cox’s Bazar camps. These included the Theatre for Development (TfD) programme, which used theatre to provide adolescent boys and girls a space to work together on socio-cultural action. TfD operates through a participatory process whereby adolescents themselves determine the issue that they want to address through group consensus. Together, they analyze the issue and develop and implement cultural and theatre productions.

The participating adolescents completed 315 shows and reached an audience of approximately 49,000

individuals from their communities. The shows often highlighted child protection issues of concern, such as child marriage and child labour. While these issues may be happening at home, adolescents are not always able to raise them. The TfD productions raised their awareness, built their confidence and offered solutions that they could teach to their peers and families.

Each production was immediately followed by a community dialogue to stimulate community-wide discussion and action around the key issue presented in the production. For example, following one production, the community jointly determined key child protection action points that they would like to undertake to alleviate the issues presented to them through the show. Additionally, camp management and village leaders took note of the issues raised, put benchmarks in place and responded with awareness campaigns and programmes, such as initiatives to reduce drug addiction, prevent child marriage or promote positive parenting.

Productions produced by adolescent girls and boys			
	Theatre	Puppet show	Total
Girls’ group	72	98	170
Boys’ group	145		145


Socio-cultural action groups by gender		
	Groups	Members
Girls’ group	72	1,800
Boys’ group	33	825

An initial challenge that UNICEF and its partners faced in engaging adolescents was families' hesitation to allow their children to participate in the TfD programme. Owing to cultural norms, there was heightened hesitation around allowing daughters to join the activities. This slowly changed after UNICEF gained the trust of community members, religious leaders and parents, as they learned about the purpose of the programme and the benefits it could bring to adolescents and the community. Obtaining buy-in from these key decision-makers and community members greatly improved UNICEF and partners' ability to engage adolescents. This, in turn, paved the way for adolescents to participate more in their communities.

BITA reported that adolescents benefited from the creation of a designated space for association and expression through the TfD programme. For girls, the programme also provided a chance to benefit from increased mobility, as guardians allowed them to participate in more activities outside the home.

Since the programme's founding, 105 socio-cultural action groups have been formed, operating across 23 Rohingya camps and their surrounding host communities. Adolescents began to undertake various initiatives outside the theater productions, such as promoting cleanliness, cleaning drains and building small bamboo bridges over streams. Through the TfD programme and socio-cultural activities, participating adolescents learned how to communicate difficult issues to peers and adults, and developed skills they need as agents of change in their communities.

Through the TfD programme, Rashida, an adolescent girl, said she was informed and empowered enough to stop her own child marriage with the help of a local Imam, the Majhi community and BITA's staff.

 **Afterwards my father decided not to give marriage to any of my sisters before age 18.**

– Rashida

As an effective way to reach and engage community members and adolescents, the TfD programme served as a springboard to a wider engagement programme for refugees and host communities in multiple sectors, such as in mental health, nutrition and disaster risk reduction.

For example, the **Adolescents as Agents for Change and for Peace in Rohingya Refugee Camps programme** launched in 2019. It aimed to enhance peaceful coexistence among refugee adolescents by empowering them to act as agents of change, to aspire towards better lives for themselves, and to prevent negative and violent behaviours. The social cohesion programme aims to reach up to 15,000 adolescents and youth with volunteer opportunities, peer and community engagement, and support and trainings for adolescents, parents and religious leaders, including on conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

## SOCIAL HUBS PROMOTE SOCIAL COHESION AND PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

As mentioned above, the influx of refugees placed significant strain on the livelihoods and environments of host communities in Cox's Bazar. This created tensions between the refugees and host communities, which sometimes resulted in violent incidents. Simultaneously, conservative cultural and social norms and practices, an increase in drug trafficking and addiction, trafficking of youth, and a lack of tolerance and peaceful coexistence in both the camps and host communities have all negatively impacted the security and potential of young people. Because these factors are known to contribute to the risk of radicalization and increased vulnerability to other threats, UNICEF Bangladesh recognized the need to intervene.

UNICEF worked alongside BITA to establish five Social Hubs in 2019, to help address the root causes of these tensions and promote peaceful coexistence and enhanced social cohesion. The number of Social Hubs had expanded to 14 by 2021, with additional support from the COAST Foundation, the Community Development Centre (CODEC) and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC).<sup>14</sup>



**TO DATE, 14 SOCIAL HUBS HAVE BEEN ESTABLISHED IN VARIOUS LOCATIONS IN CAMPS AND HOST COMMUNITIES, WITH NEARLY 12,000 ADOLESCENTS ENGAGED. THE HUBS HAVE EQUAL PARTICIPATION FROM THE LOCAL ROHINGYA REFUGEE POPULATION AND THREE BANGLADESHI HOST COMMUNITIES.**

Social Hubs are common spaces where young Rohingya and host community members gather, access technology and recreation opportunities, and develop valuable life skills. This allows them to learn from each other's cultures, contributing to the development of respect and cohesion among groups. The Social Hubs are housed in permanent structures and are located adjacent to the camps.

Each Social Hub offers a range of services, such as competency-based social cohesion and resilience training,<sup>15</sup> recreational or sports activities, computer literacy training, and access to information technology, an internet café space, learning and library facilities, U-Report and more.

To develop the Social Hubs' programming, UNICEF consulted with adolescents, their caregivers and other stakeholders. Their feedback informed the **MeWeUs training curricula** developed for young people to strengthen peacebuilding competencies for social cohesion and resilience. The first training of trainers ran in 2021, using the four-book training package (see right).

Initially, a key challenge for the Social Hubs was an inability to provide equal access to the activities to all refugee and host community adolescents. Due to restrictions imposed by the Camp in Charge (CiC), adolescents from the Rohingya community did not have the same access to the internet and technology that adolescents from the host community enjoyed. This made it difficult for Rohingya adolescents to access computer and digital literacy skills training. To address this gap, UNICEF worked with the Government of Bangladesh to share pre-agreed,

approved content in designated spaces in the internet café for Rohingya adolescents. However, this was offered only for a brief period, as measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 interrupted operations soon after the programme began.

When the Social Hubs were running, Rohingya and host community members and adolescents were beginning to engage in social cohesion- and resilience-related volunteer activities, sports initiatives and other events, such as recognizing International Human Rights Day and International Refugee Day at the Hubs.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Social Hubs assumed a dual function, serving also as Information Hubs (IFHs) for COVID-19 prevention and response. The 775 adolescent Social Change Agents (SCAs) attached to the Hubs turned their attention to community-based awareness-raising activities, following guidance from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Government of Bangladesh.

In both the camps and the host community, the SCAs used online and offline devices as portals to disseminate lifesaving information. Community volunteers focused on raising parents' awareness through message dissemination and home visits, when it was safe to do so.

### **MeWeUs CURRICULA FOR TRAINERS, ADOLESCENTS AND YOUTH**

- **Programme Overview and Facilitation Support**
- **Social Cohesion Foundation Course** (empathy, respect, cooperation, teamwork, communication, expression)
- **Community Engagement Learning Series** (critical thinking, decision-making, leadership, influence, problem solving, managing conflict)
- **Advanced Social Cohesion Topical Learning Workshop** (exploring complex topics in-depth)



When school were closed in the pandemic, Social Hubs served as a place adolescents could meet (when safe to do so).

Community-based Child Protection Committee (CBCPC) members, including community and religious leaders, also received an orientation on COVID-19 prevention messages. This recognized their key influencer role in disseminating messaging and supporting adolescents to think about and take care of their own safety and well-being.

At the 14 Social/Information Hubs during the COVID-19 response, adolescents and other community members learned how to access commodities, services, child protection support, dispute resolution mechanisms and more. The information was input into a dashboard to help meet reported needs and concerns.

In late 2021, the Social Hubs are slowly opening and hosting small Adolescent Club meetings. Once they are fully operational, additional initiatives to empower adolescents and youth are planned, including to provide access to lifesaving information and offer social innovation opportunities.<sup>16</sup>

## U-REPORT AND INFORMATION AND FEEDBACK CENTERS: MECHANISMS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE COMMUNITY

Receiving and acting on feedback from adolescents provides valuable opportunities for them to have their views heard and responded to, and informs programme improvements. Formal and informal feedback mechanisms help to capture voices, concerns and suggestions from the community, and enable their use to inform decisions made by humanitarian response actors. Several participatory community feedback mechanisms have been implemented in Cox's Bazar, both in the camps and in the host communities, including community meetings, dialogues at the Information and Feedback Centers (IFCs), and interactions with community volunteers.

UNICEF's U-Report is a feedback mechanism that can bring adolescents' voices into decision-making, enhance their access to information and encourage them to take part in community-led actions.<sup>17</sup> In Bangladesh, U-Report is a free, mobile phone-based tool for two-way community participation and feedback that relies on volunteer participation and input. It is designed to address the issues that community members care about most. Once U-Reporters submit their input, they receive important information and alerts around key current issues.



**Since coming to the Social Hub, people in the camps come to me when they have questions or need help for solving problems, because they feel that I am a good source of information.**

— Yassin, age 15



**U-Report is a platform where we can give our opinion independently.**

– Maymuna, from Leda Social Hub

Typically, U-Report is used through SMS and mobile phone applications such as WhatsApp, Viber and Facebook, which require data packages. Because government restrictions do not allow Rohingya refugees to access mobile phones or the internet, UNICEF developed an offline version of U-Report and made it available through the 14 existing Social Hubs. Here, adolescents can access U-Report through offline tablets and mobile devices. Social Hub staff take these devices and connect them to data access points, uploading the information submitted offline and transmitting it to a server to be analyzed. Young people living in the host communities, meanwhile, access U-Report through SMS and mobile applications.

U-Reporters in the camps and the host communities engage with the Cox's Bazar U-Report in three ways:

- **INFORMATION:** Adolescent U-Reporters receive access to life-changing and lifesaving information, such as how to protect themselves in a monsoon or, more recently, how to protect themselves from COVID-19, and information about the COVID-19 vaccine.
- **OPINION POLLS AND FEEDBACK MECHANISM:** Adolescent U-Reporters give feedback anonymously or participate in polls on key issues. UNICEF works with adolescent groups to develop the poll questions, and UNICEF's Child Protection team develops action points in support. UNICEF has promoted seven polls to date, on issues such as reducing child marriage, preventing and mitigating drug addiction, and improving handwashing. The polls are made available in English, Bangla and Burmese, with the results accessible to all.
- **STORIES:** Adolescent U-Reporters share stories from camps and host communities through an interactive audio or text format.

Their inputs are used to inform decision-making for community action plans.

**ACROSS THE 14 SOCIAL HUBS, 830 YOUNG PEOPLE ARE SIGNED UP AS U-REPORTERS AS OF AUGUST 2021.**

**IN A U-REPORT SURVEY IN MARCH 2020, OF 3,028 RESPONSES, 3,018 RELATED TO ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE.**

One of the key challenges UNICEF and its partners encountered in implementing U-Report among adolescents in Cox's Bazar is low literacy. To address this barrier, U-Report communications are kept simple and easy to understand and use picture- or GIF-based messages. Adolescents are trained on how to use U-Report, to ensure that they are familiar with the process, and how they can share information with their peers in their communities.

## **KEY LESSONS LEARNED ACROSS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND ADOLESCENT PROGRAMMING**

The adolescent-centred programming yielded key lessons to inform UNICEF Bangladesh's continuing work to help ensure meaningful community engagement and adolescent participation.

- A **strong integration between sectors** helps to provide a comprehensive package of services for adolescents and youth in a one-stop-shop modality. For instance, the C4D, Child Protection and Education teams work together at the MPCs, while the C4D and Child Protection teams collaborate on Social Hub activities.
- It is important to **consider prevailing social and behavioural perspectives and norms, as well as trust issues**, while designing interventions, and to develop programmes based on local feedback. For instance, a World Food Programme (WFP) conflict sensitivity and social cohesion measurement study in 2021 helped to inform



Asheka, 16, is a youth volunteer sharing lifesaving information. **“I mainly speak with women and girls in my community to inform them about how to care for children and their own health by following best practices of hygiene management at home,”** she said.

Asheka arrived in Bangladesh in September 2017. She said she enjoys the challenge of working as a young volunteer: **“I have been working here for seven months. I feel very happy that I’m able to do something for my community that I didn’t know before coming here.”**

current Social Hub activities.<sup>18</sup> UNICEF also conducted community assessments to develop the MeWeUS and Life Skills curricula.

- ➔ **Programme design flexibility** is critical for being able to respond to young people’s ideas. For instance, the Multipurpose Child and Adolescent Centres were established from a needs assessment by girls and boys in Adolescent Clubs. UNICEF also found that U-Report offers a way to elicit actionable suggestions from adolescents, to help design programming that is meaningful and relevant to them.
- ➔ When making changes in adolescent-centred spaces, services and programmes (such as at the MPCs), it is important to **engage children, adolescents, caregivers and gatekeepers**<sup>19</sup> in the community throughout the process. UNICEF Bangladesh found that engagement was strongest when adolescents understood why changes were necessary and took part in decision-making. This ensured that they did not feel alienated, but rather had ownership of the activities and programmes.
- ➔ Adolescents in the Radio Listener Clubs can benefit when **feedback is regularly collected, systemically reviewed and integrated** into new radio episodes. Facilitators can play a key role in submitting the feedback sheets and relaying information. The feedback loop helps keep the episodes accessible and relevant to the club members’ experiences and concerns, informs

dialogues that yield solutions, and can influence programming. For instance, when the C4D team received information relevant to child protection activities, it would pass it on to the Child Protection team, so that they could design programming in response to issues of concern.

- ➔ The Theatre for Development programme highlighted the **benefit of engaging with gatekeepers prior to or while engaging adolescents**. This requires identifying who the gatekeepers are, understanding cultural and social considerations, and recognizing specific hesitations about adolescents’ participation in the programme. Once these factors are known, dialogue can occur to address gatekeepers’ concerns and gain their trust, allowing adolescents to participate.
- ➔ Implementing U-Report and other digital engagement methods requires **sensitivity to the different accessibility barriers facing adolescents in the given context**. In Cox’s Bazar, this included low levels of literacy, the lack of a written Rohingya language, and government restrictions to internet and mobile phone access. Addressing such barriers may require modifying the platform, such as making U-Report communications available offline or developing simple, easy-to-understand, picture-based messages. It may also require working with government partners to adapt policies to overcome such barriers, as in the case of the Rohingya refugee camps.

- ➔ **UNICEF and its partners can play a convener role when adolescents face restrictive policies**, such as the inequitable access to digital literacy services at the Social Hubs. Here, negotiations with the Government to use pre-agreed content at the Hub's internet café allowed UNICEF and partners to provide access to digital literacy skills training to Rohingya adolescents.
- ➔ **Connecting community needs to activities** can elevate the value of adolescent engagement. For instance, young people engaged in vocational trainings in the MPCs learned how to produce and distribute masks for COVID-19 prevention, which highlighted their visibility as key stakeholders and contributors in the local community. The efficacy of the MPCs could be enhanced further with the attachment of community-led outreach modalities.

Any good practice in UNICEF programming and humanitarian response puts the affected community — men, women, children and adolescents — at the center. In addition to building on the lessons above, UNICEF offers tools and guiding principles to help ensure meaningful participation that respects the community's rights and dignity while addressing their needs. These include:

- ➔ The ***Minimum Quality Standards and Indicators in Community Engagement***, which provides globally established guidance on the importance of community engagement, including adolescent and youth engagement;<sup>20</sup>
- ➔ The ***IASC Guidelines on Working with and for Young People in Humanitarian and Protracted Crises***, a comprehensive guide for supporting adolescent and youth engagement;<sup>21</sup> and
- ➔ UNICEF's ***Engaged and Heard!*** guidelines, which support the design of meaningful and equitable adolescent participation and civic engagement.<sup>22</sup>



## CONCLUSION

As this case study highlights, engaging adolescents and youth as agents of change — rather than merely beneficiaries — during a humanitarian crisis benefits them and their communities in the short- and long-term. Involving adolescents in community activities not only ensures the appropriateness and acceptance of activities, but can create sense of ownership by the engaged adolescents, their peers, and elders, when changes are proposed and implemented. Community engagement programmes not only act as entry points for adolescent engagement, but also help build the capacities of adolescents to be respectful, resilient and innovative as active citizens in their new environment.

The **Multipurpose Child and Adolescent Centres** are an example of how multisectoral services can be well-coordinated and efficiently delivered to address the holistic needs of the most vulnerable girls and boys. The **Adolescent Radio Listener Groups** and **Theatre for Development programmes** highlight that adolescent girls and boys benefit having the space, audience and structure for discussion, discovery and participation.



The adolescent-friendly programming provides a fun and engaging way for them to build their competencies and participate in community decision-making and action. The **Social Hubs** illustrate that adolescents can play a key role in strengthening and promoting social cohesion and building peace within and between communities. When adapted to the local context, **U-Report** can provide systematic way to capture and analyze adolescent views, even for those without access to the internet, helping to ensure that their voices can inform decision-making by humanitarian actors.

Engaging adolescents in humanitarian contexts is a complex undertaking, especially in places with large young populations, as in Cox's Bazar. However, strategic programming can advance both adolescents' rights and development goals, so that adolescents not only survive, but also thrive as they grow into adulthood.

Meaningful participation can only happen in partnership with adults. As highlighted, it is critical to build adults' awareness, skills and capacities. In the context of Cox's Bazar, the permission of parents as well as community and religious leaders was critical to enabling adolescents' engagement with the wider community, particularly in very conservative contexts with strong gender roles and cultural norms. Obtaining these gatekeepers' trust was indispensable for achieving the programme's goals.

As UNICEF Bangladesh's efforts with adolescents have shown, when a large migrant population resettles into refugee camps, it is essential to prioritize and address the needs of both the refugee population and the host community. While adolescents in such fragile situations are very vulnerable and exposed to risks, they are also able to meaningfully contribute to the development of their communities, especially in the areas of social cohesion and peacebuilding.

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## ENDNOTES:

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- 8 The Youth Working Group is a cross-sectoral group that supports, advocates for and coordinates inclusive adolescent and youth programming in the refugee camps and host communities.
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