



CHILDREN ON THE EDGE - ROHINGYA REFUGEE CRISIS

2018 FIELD REPORT

BACKGROUND

In the wake of the 2017 genocide in Rakhine State, Myanmar, over 700,000 refugees fled across the border into Bangladesh carrying their families and what few belongings they could. They all arrived with horrifying stories of murder, rape, and unspeakable abuse at the hands of the Burmese military. Aid agencies rushed into Bangladesh to provide assistance with what quickly became the world's fastest growing refugee crisis.

Whilst using the situation as a means for gaining legitimacy on the global stage, the government walks a tightrope on 'the Rohingya issue' with its own people, who have been conditioned to resent and fear them as 'invaders' over the years. As such, the government tempers and controls refugee support, planning to contain the Rohingya indefinitely in densely-populated camps or move them to isolated islands, a safe distance from the local population.

To avoid the appearance of creating too many refugee opportunities, livelihood programmes are curtailed and approval for sanitation and health programmes has slowed dramatically. Having decreed education can only be conducted in Burmese and English, the government has thus far refused to approve textbooks for refugee children, thwarting their potential to assimilate with the host community.

While the December elections were expected to bring greater clarity for the status of the Rohingya in Bangladesh, the government has yet to reach a consensus. For the time being, more than 750,000 refugees are stalled in the border camps, with agencies like Children on the Edge striving to assist them as best we can, while their fate is determined.



OUR RESPONSE

2018 was the most challenging year for our work in Bangladesh to date. In addition to trebling the number of schools we operate in the camp, the overwhelming influx required us to branch into humanitarian provision.

These efforts were divided into three phases...



PHASE 1: EMERGENCY RESPONSE

SEPTEMBER 2017 – APRIL 2018

As one of only a few agencies working with refugees on the Bangladesh border prior to this crisis, Children on the Edge found itself in a unique position to respond. Having a long-established presence, with staff already familiar with the nuances of the situation, we were able to respond effectively, respectfully and relationally.

While our staff coordinated with UN agencies to distribute supplies in the earliest weeks of the crisis, we carefully researched the situation, observing how rushed, uncoordinated and poorly executed emergency services were making matters worse. Overflowing latrines and broken tube wells littered many areas of the camps.

To identify the needs and gaps in services, over 5,000 homes in Cox's Bazar were canvassed, followed by zones covering 30,000 households in the Kutupalong-Balukhali 'mega camp'.

In response, we:

- **Distributed food** to nearly **6,000 families**, reaching over **30,000 refugees**
- **Installed 200 latrines** with a 1/3 more sewage capacity than the standard required
- Sourced and delivered durable, waterproof **solar lights for 5,250 homes**
- **Dug 34 deep tube** wells providing sustainable, clean drinking water for tens of thousands of camp residents

"Before people would come and build a well or a latrine and then they leave. They don't talk to us. We don't know who they are. They just hang up their sign and leave when it is finished. But these people talk to us. We know who they are".

Naeem - member of Rohingya 'WASH Committee'



PHASE 2: BUILDING SCHOOLS & NAVIGATING BUREAUCRACY

APRIL – JULY 2018

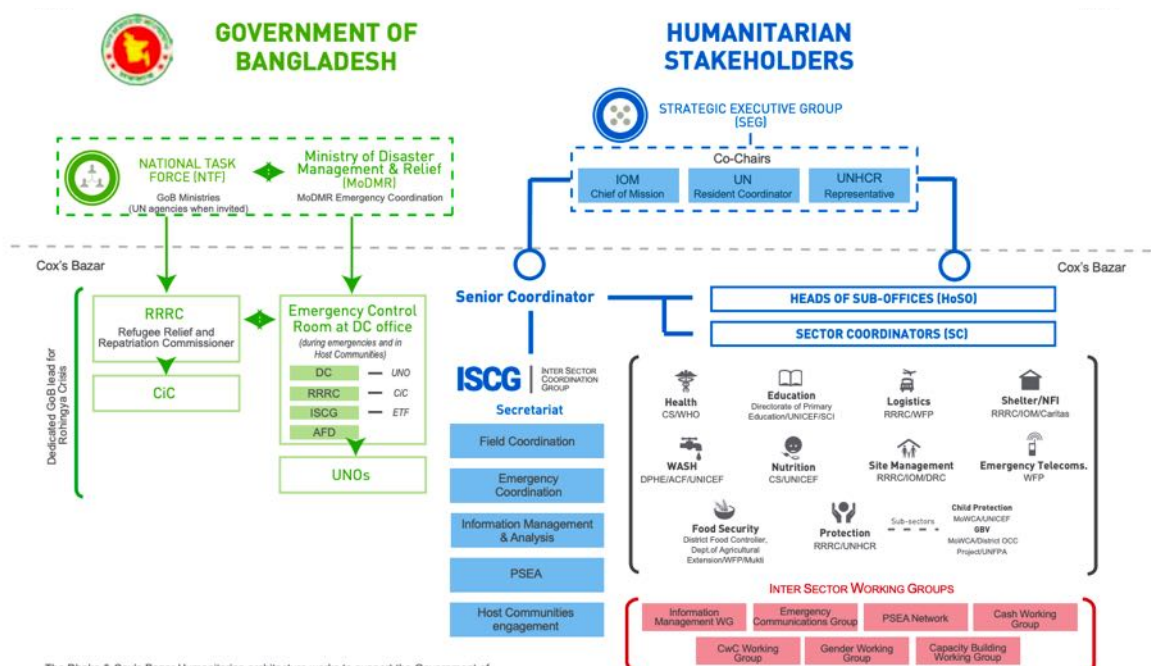
By April, we turned our efforts to providing consistent education to newly arrived children. Having transitioned our 45 established refugee schools to UNICEF, our next phase of research showed that the needs of children in the camps and communities vastly outstripped available resources.

In response, our work is focused on three areas: the Kutupalong-Balukhali refugee camp, the Cox's Bazar slums, and the Doharazi Rohingya enclave communities.

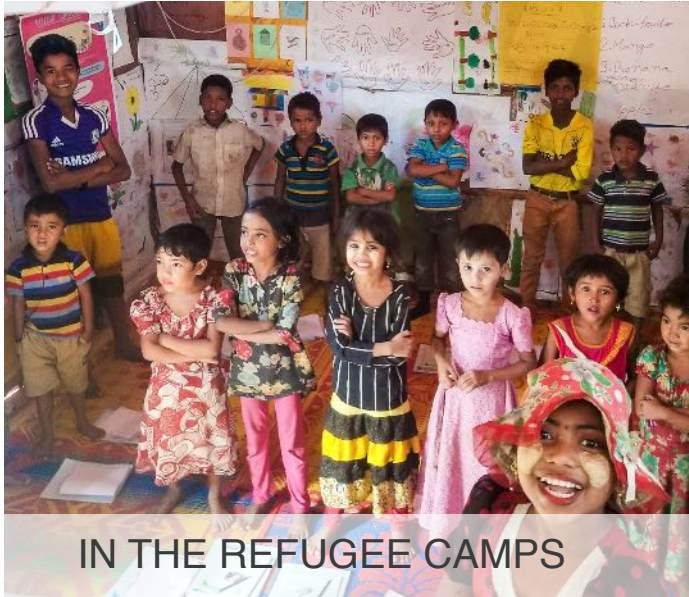
We have worked since 2010 to obtain official government recognition for our schools within the refugee camp. When that finally arrived, it brought a burdensome myriad of oversight.

In practice, there are now seven government offices able to claim a role in approving NGO work in the refugee camps. Additionally, as the camp ballooned, it fractured into dozens of 'blocks', each with its own government-appointed administrator, overseeing 'day-to-day' matters.

Navigating the web of bureaucracy now needed to identify, gain approval for, and construct 75 Learning Centres within the refugee camps, took four months, and is a significant achievement in the current environment.



The Dhaka & Cox's Bazar Humanitarian architecture works to support the Government of Bangladesh's response to the Rohingya Crisis. This Support extends at all the above noted levels in both Dhaka and Cox's Bazar.



Despite the bureaucratic challenges and the lack of physical space. **We constructed 75 schools (150 classrooms) in the Kutupalong Balukhali camp.** We then focussed on hiring and training 150 Rohingya refugee and local Bangladeshi teachers.

The final months of the year were dedicated to developing the classroom spaces and trialling new and creative initiatives.

All this has the aim of establishing a benchmark of good practice for refugee education here in 2019. As the government has only permitted the use of basic learning materials (e.g. alphabet books, song sheets, white drawing paper), the scope of what we could provide in the camp has been limited thus far.

However, we have been able to use the time to focus on helping the children develop a sense of belonging and giving valuable opportunities for fun learning, creativity and self-expression, something that we specialise in, and have always augmented standard curriculums with.

By the time our new curriculum is implemented, the children will not only have learned the basic building blocks of literacy and numeracy, but will be well accustomed and adapted to the learning environment.

This time has also allowed us to work on developing other innovative aspects of the programme, which we will expand on this year.



Schools supported by Children on the Edge in the Cox's Bazar slums have run uninterrupted since 2010.

These 18 classrooms are enthusiastically supported by local communities and government officials, and much of the goodwill we enjoy in the camps can be attributed to their long-standing presence.

The fact that our programme has not overlooked the needs of the adversely affected host community, provides genuine credibility for our work as a whole. Furthermore, a full third of the children living in these communities come from Rohingya families, trying to blend in after fleeing previous waves of violence and cut off from any education services.

While a study by migration researchers 'xchange' in July 2018 stated that 85% of local people believed that Rohingya children should not go to Bangladeshi schools, in our Cox's Bazar Learning Centres this year, we have seen the first examples of Rohingya children feeling safe to publicly identify as Rohingya. This reflects the benefits of the programme with regards to social cohesion between communities, a problem widely identified by the current Joint Response.



Approximately 3.5 hours from the border, in **the Rohingya Doharazi Enclaves, we established 10 new classrooms.**

Since the early 1990s these areas have served as a safe haven for Rohingya refugees fleeing abuse in Rakhine State. However, being unregistered and stateless, Rohingya families here enjoy none of the services available to their counterparts in the refugee camps.

Over the past three years a pilot programme of four classrooms has grown to 10 classrooms providing education and health services to 500 children – none of whom would be eligible to receive education otherwise.

Of all the students attending the 10 new classrooms we have set up in these communities, not a *single* child had ever attended a formal school before.

In many ways, these are the most vulnerable children served by the programme, and Children on the Edge is the only agency working in these areas providing support.



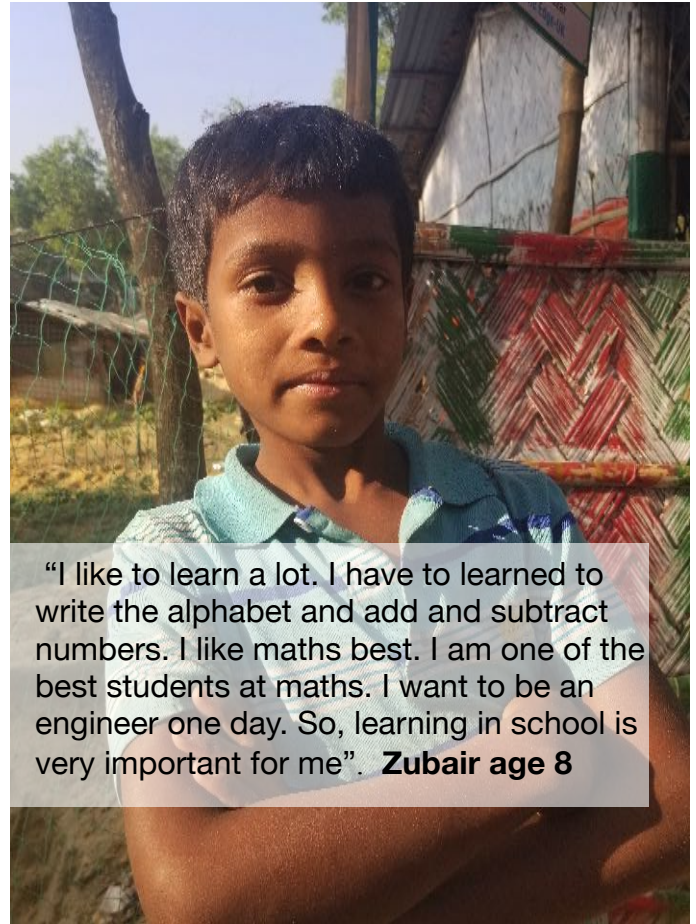
EDUCATION IN KUTUPALONG

GETTING STARTED IN THE CAMP

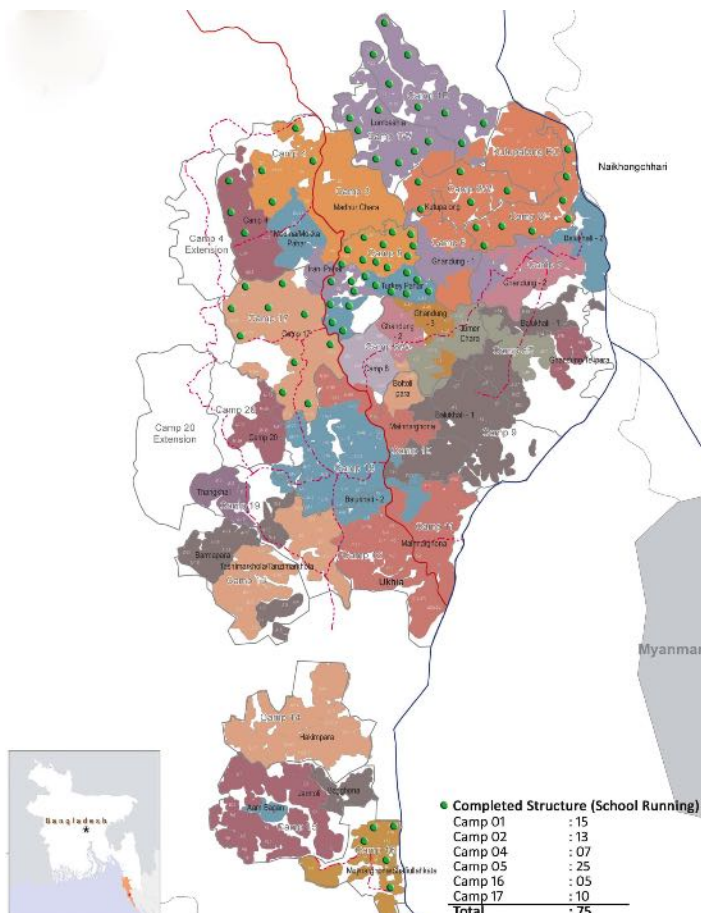
Spread out over seven kilometres of steep terrain at the foot of the Chittagong hill tracts, Kutupalong is a densely populated area that nobody would have chosen as a site for the world's largest refugee camp. With 66,000 refugees packed into a square kilometre, the camp faces numerous challenges, but none larger than the lack of space.

Carving out adequate room for a school in this environment, where land is the greatest resource, proved to be a tremendous challenge. It was therefore quite a feat for Children on the Edge to fully complete construction in Kutupalong throughout 2018.

Over 18 months since the start of the crisis, despite the wealth of agencies investing in Learning Centres, **only about 45% of refugee children aged 4-14 currently have access to education** in the camps. Navigating the multiple layers of bureaucracy and negotiating building space in the densely populated camp makes provision a huge challenge.



"I like to learn a lot. I have to learned to write the alphabet and add and subtract numbers. I like maths best. I am one of the best students at maths. I want to be an engineer one day. So, learning in school is very important for me". **Zubair age 8**



Despite these obstacles, we have successfully established **75 Learning Centres**, divided into **150 classrooms**, which have all been running five days a week since June 2018, providing education for **7,500 children**.

When restrictions are finally lifted children will be following our bespoke curriculum, covering literacy, writing, maths and science. They will take standardised exams to prepare them for entry into the mainstream system, should national policy allow this in the future.

In the meantime, they are adapting to the classroom environment, learning basic literacy, numeracy, language, health and hygiene and we are able to give a strong focus on creativity and self-expression.

TEACHERS

150 Bangladesh and Rohingya teachers are fully trained and running classes each day. Even though they've had to work within strict limits, they have been trained on communication, child rights, health, hygiene, first aid, identifying trauma, classroom management and how to make learning engaging.

This training has had a brilliant impact on the children, who have adapted their behaviour quickly to the classroom routine, established good friendships, developed a strong sense of safety and belonging and enjoyed learning letters, numbers and languages through songs, rhymes and dances.

Panua Dey is a Rohingya teacher, she's been working in the Centres for three months and describes how "The way we teach is different in these schools. I have learned how to make learning interesting for the kids. Like using songs and rhymes to learn. During the training we learned how to teach maths using sticks and branches. When I taught the kids in that way, they really understood the maths. I felt very good teaching that way".

Teachers have focused on forming a close bond with the children, ensuring the environment is a welcoming space where they can develop a sense of safety and belonging.

Toslina has also been teaching for three months and says "The biggest success has been learning about each child in my class. Knowing their names. Knowing who they are. I care about them very much. For most of the kids, they had never been to school before. Being in our schools helps them to feel safe and calm. They feel like they belong in school now".

Parents interviewed also reflect the feeling of safety created for their children. Shalif has a daughter at the Centre and says "The change in her is that she is more relaxed now. Before she was very worried about what we will do. Now she seems much happier".

Another parent Mohammed says of his daughter "She smiles more now. She has made new friends too, so she is much happier than before".

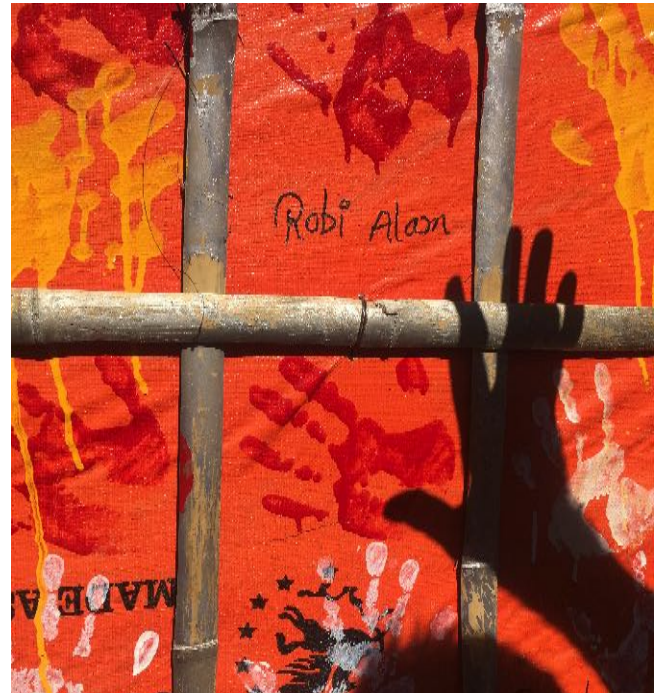


OUR APPROACH

Restricted this year to teaching from only basic texts (alphabets, rhymes, songs), staff have begun to lay the foundation for an education programme which will be both innovative and effective in 2019. Since the Centres opened between May and June 2018 they have already been developing as distinct from other education provision currently available in the camp. These unique traits are as follows:

1. The **physical space** of the classrooms has been developing unlike any others in the camp. This distinction begins outside of the walls of the classrooms, where a head-high bamboo fence separates the children from the hustle and bustle of camp life. An array of flowers and vines have been planted to cover the walls in order to create a green barrier which allows the children to both physically and mentally separate themselves from the harsh realities outside.

Somira, aged 8 says “I help the teacher water the plants. Taking care of the plants is one of my favourite things. I like the garden space and I want to add more flowers and maybe some vegetables. We had a big garden in my old house. We had more pumpkins than we could eat”.



2. Another important trait is developing a sense of **ownership** of the schools by the children. This buy-in is created first by having each school building decorated with the hand-prints of the students accompanied by their names. This reinforces the understanding that the school belongs to them. Once inside, the Centres are a riot of colour, covered from floor to ceiling with the children's own artwork and decorations.

“We have lots of colour at our Centres. Decorations. Art. Drawings. These are all made by the kids themselves”.

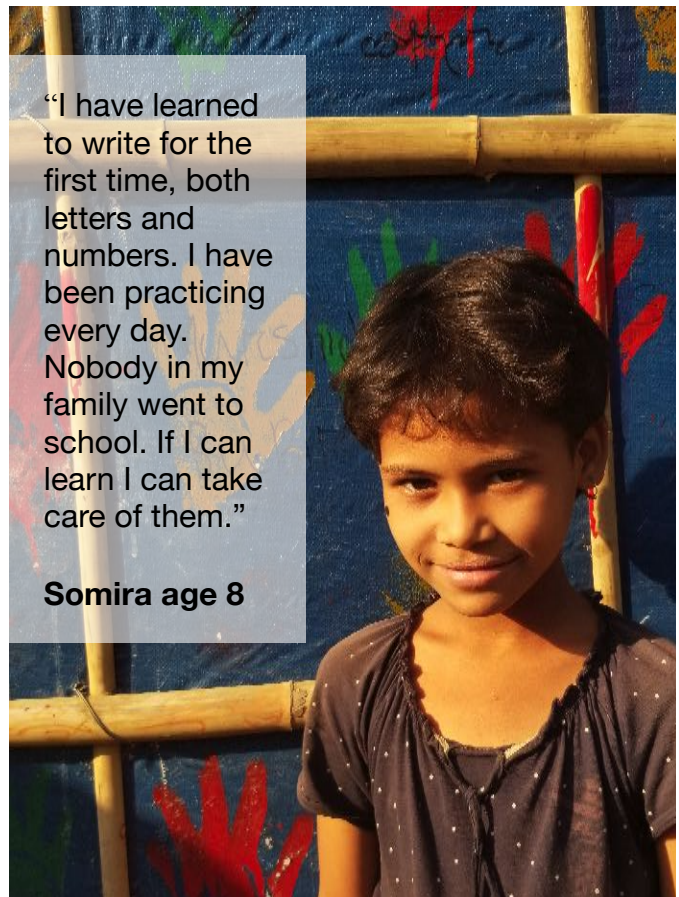
Sanjil – Bangladeshi teacher

We are also installing custom-made, low-lying desks for students. Each child will have a ‘cubby’ in their desk which is a space that belongs only to them. The aim is to give each child a place which is uniquely theirs in an otherwise overcrowded refugee camp.

3. The single greatest barrier to education in the refugee camps is the Bangladesh government's policy on **language**. Printed text must only be in Burmese and English, *languages not spoken by almost any of the refugees or local residents*. The policy is a dead-end for the meaningful provision of education. Given that the Rohingya language (very similar to the local dialect spoken in the southernmost part of Bangladesh) is not a written language, there is no practical means of teaching the children in their mother tongue.

This is an enormous obstacle, but Children on the Edge has faced many such challenges over the course of its work in Bangladesh. In order to overcome this policy, the programme has developed a two-fold approach:

- i) We will be the first organisation introducing **multi-media content** into the classrooms. Battery-powered projectors will deliver lessons on academic subjects, health/hygiene, problem-solving, creative thinking and child rights. We are currently developing these materials, which will be ready for delivery in March 2019. When completed, every student will receive one digital lesson a week. As funding is raised, we hope to increase that number.



"I have learned to write for the first time, both letters and numbers. I have been practicing every day. Nobody in my family went to school. If I can learn I can take care of them."

Somira age 8

After a multi media taster session with her class, Teacher Sanjil says "They kids loved the day we brought the projector to the classroom. They ask me every day now when we will use the projector again".

- ii) We are also working to develop the refugee camps' only **non-linguistic curriculum**. These materials will teach educational concepts, problem solving, and critical thinking without relying on a written language. Given that the government-approved text books are in languages which neither the child or teacher can understand, developing a separate and more appropriate means of delivering education seems the only choice.

Children on the Edge will continue to use its platform to lobby the Bangladeshi government to allow the use of Bengali script and language in the classrooms. Feedback from focus groups informs us that the vast majority of camp residents will refuse to return to Myanmar, and see their futures in Bangladesh. However, if the next generation of Rohingya children can neither read nor write in the language of their new home, they will remain second-class citizens, just as they were in Myanmar.

4. The **schedule and structure** of our schools

are also unique within the refugee camps. Classrooms only run two shifts per day with 25 students in each shift (as opposed to the norm of three shifts of 30 students). This is because we previously trialed the three-shift system and found that quality and retention of education dropped dramatically. Additionally, Children on the Edge schools only operate five days each week, and one of those days is set aside for strictly non-academic activities such as drama, art projects and singing. Again, past experience has shown that students benefit both personally and academically when there is a healthy amount of time allotted for creative activities.

5. All Centres are equipped with a well-stocked **First Aid** kit and teachers receive First Aid training. This prepares them to identify serious health concerns in students, know when and how to refer them to health professionals and learn how to utilise the materials found in the First Aid kits. While the majority of Rohingya refugees have access to a health facility within a 30-minute walking distance, the services offered in health facilities vary. Log books kept in the First Aid boxes already show how much of a worthwhile investment this has been.



"The moments that stand out to me are probably watching the kids perform their plays. They are very creative and funny sometimes. I am proud when I see them expressing themselves"

Tajina – Bangladeshi teacher



6. Lastly, we have prepared several innovative platforms for the **children's voices to be heard**. In January 2019, the programme published the refugee camps' first and only child-produced newsletter containing the artwork, stories, and poems of current students.

This activity alone generated a great deal of excitement amongst the students, who report they frequently feel anonymous and forgotten amidst the sprawl of the refugee camp.

Toslina has been teaching for three months, and described how "Some of the kids were very excited about the newsletter. They all really want their pictures and poems printed for everyone to see". Another teacher Sanjil said "Some of the kids in my class have their artwork in the school newsletter. They were very proud of this".

Quarterly Child Council meetings are facilitated at each Centre and modelled on those established in the Cox's Bazar Community Schools. They give elected student leaders the opportunity to learn about issues that affect them and express the thoughts and opinions of their classmates directly to staff.

Children on the Edge is very confident that our prior experience in the camp and unique perspective on education with Rohingya children will allow us to set the benchmark for quality education in the refugee camp areas.

Over the course of 2019:



FUTURE PLANS

- We will continue to grow the garden spaces, hopefully adding vegetables and providing shade.
- In addition to providing multi media learning across all the classrooms by March, we will develop an initiative to allow students to prepare their own digital content for distribution to other schools, both inside and outside the camps. These will be approximately 5-minute video segments of students demonstrating a skill, sharing a lesson learned, or simply telling their story. This will allow the students in all Children on the Edge schools to be better connected and heard.
- March will also see the first meetings of the new Child Councils and School Management Committees. Child Councils have seen great success regarding children's participation in Cox's Bazar but not been possible in the camps until now.

For seven years, School Management Committees (made up of parents and local community members) were essential in ensuring local ownership and the survival of our 45 schools in the

Kutupalong makeshift camp, and we are looking forward to developing them on a larger scale in the current environment.

- We will also work on growing the newsletter to include input from parents and community leaders in the future as there are precious few outlets for the voices of the refugees to be heard.
- We will develop and introduce a parallel non linguistic curriculum to overcome the language barrier and enrich learning.
- Whilst teachers have had basic training in identifying trauma, because of the harrowing experiences that many of the children have faced, we will be equipping them further for their day to day interaction and care for vulnerable children.