

# 4 Months of COVID-19 programming restrictions

A summary of consultations detailing Rohingya experiences in the camps



Edition 8, 25<sup>th</sup> August 2020

Edition 8 of COVID-19 Explained delves into the lived experiences of Rohingya refugees in the camps, providing more detailed accounts of the problems they are currently facing. This edition highlights the very real secondary impacts resulting from the combined COVID-19 containment measures and the advent of the monsoon (critical assistance only, see RRRRC guidance 08/04/2020). This edition also briefly compares current issues and concerns with those reported in April 2020, in COVID-19 Explained Edition 5, to assess whether there have been any major changes.

Due to current data collection restrictions, and to ensure the safety of the researchers, this edition is informed by 19 key informant interviews across 9 camps, gathered towards the end of June. The questions were open-ended, allowing Rohingya respondents to express themselves fully. The findings highlight a spectrum of current challenges and living conditions in the camps.

## Overall findings & recommendations:

The COVID-19 containment measures enforced at the end of March have gravely impacted the day-to-day life of refugees, further reducing their ability to meet their daily needs, increasing their economic vulnerability, and contributing to feelings of insecurity. Existing vulnerabilities, exacerbated by the containment measures, have been further aggravated by the advent of the monsoon.



Four months of reduced programming has meant that living conditions in the camps are deteriorating. An urgent revision of the current COVID-19 restrictions is required to allow humanitarian agencies to increase the assistance provided, especially shelter assistance and much needed maintenance and repairs of public facilities such as toilets and bathing facilities.



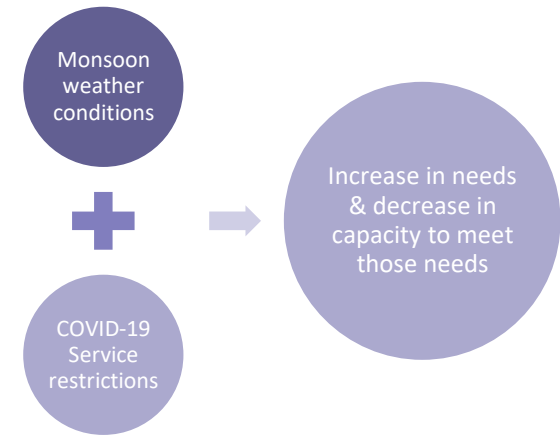
Coping mechanisms have been significantly challenged by restrictions on various camp-based activities, including cash for work. Rohingya refugees show increasing concern that humanitarians are unable to solve their problems, negatively impacting their trust in service providers.



In June, people reported that the secondary impacts of COVID-19 containment measures were a greater threat to their overall wellbeing than COVID-19 itself. In April, there had been more fear of the virus itself than of secondary impacts.

## The main identified problems were:

1. Shelter damage and lack of protection during the monsoon season.
2. Access to sufficient food and livelihood opportunities to meet basic needs.
3. Access to water and problems with hygiene facilities.
4. Social cohesion challenges and feelings of insecurity.



The drastic reduction in humanitarian programming and decreased ability to implement critical services has led to an increase in unmet needs. Many Rohingya have been unable to fortify their homes against rain and windstorms because shelter-related service restrictions meant that monsoon preparedness activities were not completed as planned. Additionally, common coping mechanisms, such as increasing debt, borrowing assistance from family or neighbors, or selling assistance were reported as less effective than in previous periods, more difficult to access, or unavailable because of the changes due to COVID-19. As a result, many families feel desperate and uncertain about their future. Data from the response-wide community feedback mechanism over the last two months shows that support for damaged housing, damaged or nonfunctional public infrastructure and facilities including pathways, toilets, and bathing facilities, challenges accessing water, and issues with food assistance and registration are frequently reported (SMSD, 01/08/2020). Informants also describe a breakdown in social cohesion and security in the camps. This has been highlighted by the Protection Sector and humanitarian agencies across sectors which reported increasing criminal activity, intimate partner violence, and sexual and gender-based violence in the camps due to a decrease in income, limited resources, fear, and a reduced humanitarian presence in the camps (Discussions with protection sector actors CXB, 06/2020, CARE, OXFAM, UNWomen, ISCG 05/2020, ACAPS 06/2020).

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**Methodology:** This edition of COVID-19 Explained is based on open-ended discussions with 19 Rohingya refugees conducted between 16 and 24 June 2020 in 9 camps (1W, 1E, 3, 4, 8E, 9, 15, 16, 20) by IOM CWC's Rohingya researchers using convenience sampling. The findings are thus indicative and provide a general overview of issues in the areas where they were collected. All consultations were recorded, and the transcriptions and translations checked by a linguist who specializes in Rohingya and South Asian languages and culture. The data was then analysed using QSR qualitative data analysis software (NVivo).

All staff received training on how to protect themselves and the people in their consultations from undue risk of COVID-19 transmission and all researchers wore masks, maintained physical distancing, and practiced strict hygiene practices while conducting the consultations. The use of trained Rohingya field researchers in the camps allowed for data to be collected face-to-face while minimizing people's interaction with those outside their immediate social group.

**Limitations:** Due to the continued risk of COVID-19 and movement restrictions between the camps at the time of data collection, the Rohingya researchers conducted only a small number of interviews with people around their area of residence. This edition, unlike others, does not have equal representation of female and male respondents (respondents were mostly male), so the indicative findings cannot be applied across demographic groups and can only be used to provide a general understanding of some of the current issues in the camps.

The information outlined in this report does not represent the official views of IOM or ACAPS in Bangladesh. It reflects an analysis of the views of the Rohingya respondents who participated in the interviews and their experiences in the residing in the refugee camps.

## What are the biggest problems currently?

### 1. Exposed to the monsoon weather conditions due to damaged housing:

COVID-19 service restrictions left households unprotected and exposed to monsoon rains. Since 26 March 2020, COVID-19 containment measures put a temporary halt to activities carried out by Shelter Sector partners, with only emergency shelter response permitted. Therefore, activities that are commonly done in preparation for the monsoon season, such as shelter improvements, repairs, maintenance, training, preparedness messaging, and the delivery of additional shelter materials, were not completed at the scale planned by responders. Site development partners also could not complete pre-monsoon infrastructure reinforcement work on bridges and pathways or slope failure mitigation initiatives (RRRC 08/04/2020, ACAPS, IOM, SMSD and Shelter sector, 08/20).

Of the 19 consultations, 15 Rohingya refugees stressed that their community's biggest problem is shelter, with many describing sleeping in waterlogged and leaking homes with perpetually wet floors and no tools or materials with which to plug the numerous holes. In addition to challenges in the home, 11 refugees specifically detailed problems with public infrastructure such as roads, walkways, and public facilities.

*"We are suffering so many difficulties here. During monsoon season, the rainwater enters my shelter. The whole night we can't sleep as everything in my shelter is wet." (Rohingya female informant)*

*"We were given some fabric bags and we keep those in the wet place to make it dry and we put some extra plastic on the roof from where the rainwater entered. We hope we get shelter services someday." (Rohingya male informant)*

Six respondents specifically describe being afraid of landslides, with their homes located at the top or bottom of a ridge with no way of protecting their families from potential risk.

*"I'm worried about two things, one of them is the tarpaulin on the roof now, because it is damaged and often rainwater enters the shelter. The other is that my shelter is in risky place. I don't know when a landslide will happen and when my shelter will be destroyed. It seems the shelter will fall down. Not only is it risk for me, but it is also a risk for the people who are at the bottom of the mountain, below me. Such situations exist in other blocks right now too." (Rohingya male informant)*

### 2. Lack of access to sufficient food and livelihood opportunities to meet basic needs

Fourteen people raised the issue of food assistance and the drastic reduction in income generating activities as their biggest problems. These issues are associated with the current containment measures and the temporary suspension of income related activities. The change

in distribution modality,<sup>1</sup> resulting in less choice for households, and the backlog in cases that require the resolution of registration issues has made it more challenging for Rohingya refugees to meet their basic needs.

*“We are just eating whatever we get. We are eating rice with water without any curry.” (Rohingya female informant)*

*“During coronavirus time because of lockdown conditions I am having difficulties to manage food to eat. The food provided by WFP is not enough. I have no extra income, hence I have to sell some food items to make money because my children are requesting to eat meat and fish. In this moment we are eating half of the amount that we ate before.” (Rohingya male informant)*

Collecting food assistance was identified as a major challenge in the communities of five respondents. This was due to registration issues or having to travel long distances and across camp boundaries to collect assistance. Reaching distribution points has become more challenging since the pandemic began due to movement restrictions. The addition of monsoon rains has resulted in vulnerable households struggling to collect assistance across the hilly terrain, especially those without an abled bodied man in their household. Although porter services do exist and have been scaled up during the COVID-19 response, respondents noted that many porters request a fee for their services, and they do not have the money to pay this. Instead, some households have resorted to selling less preferred foods for lower-than-average prices near distribution points. Some reported that they received damaged or wet food and, as a result, are unable to sell the assistance.

*“We have not been able to access the services we need as before. We are only getting LPG. And getting ration (rice). I'm very thankful to them [humanitarian agencies]. But we have a big problem with the distribution center. We live in Camp 16, but the distribution center is in Camp 15. As it is monsoon season, it is difficult for us to bring rations from Camp 15 to Camp 16. Sometimes, the rice gets wet and it becomes useless and causes diarrhea. We all face this problem, especially widows.” (Rohingya male informant)*

The overall ability of Rohingya refugees to manage the change in assistance and to access products currently not widely provided by the response, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, shelter materials, and preventive and chronic healthcare, has been negatively impacted by the suspension of income generating activities, the decrease in remittances, and the increase in prices of essential items, all resulting from COVID-19 containment measures.

*“Due to the coronavirus disease, my sons cannot move anywhere and are unable to earn money. Otherwise my daughter is old enough to get married, but I couldn't. We have no income, which is why we are facing many difficulties at running the household. We can't access money. Even the provided food assistance [by humanitarians] is not enough for us” (Rohingya female informant)*

*“I'm feeling another big worry is that goods' price are increasing day to day. Such as the goods which were sold with five taka nowadays it's price became ten taka. And vegetables, fish and all the food items prices are increased. Nowadays people have no income, but goods' prices are increasing day to day.” (Rohingya male informant)*

### 3. Access to water and problems with hygiene facilities

Despite the increase in hand washing stations and public health messaging on the importance of hygiene during the pandemic, the reduction in humanitarian staff operating in the camps and the repositioning of resources to COVID-19 specific activities has negatively impacted the upkeep of public facilities.

Nine informants reported that due to movement restrictions between camps and weather-related damages to pedestrian infrastructure, households are unable to use toilets or access more functional water sources in nearby camps, leaving them with limited options. They reported toilets were full, overcrowded (one respondent reported up to 90 people for 3-4 toilets), and damaged. Many damaged toilets were reported to have not been repaired since the beginning of the pandemic.

*“Since after Eid-ul-Fidr, the toilets are full. We are 17 families in the same place, with the population of about 90 people, but there are 4 toilets for all of us. It is very complicated and disgusting. Almighty Allah knows it! Now, all the toilets are locked because they are full. If we want to pass stool, we have nowhere to go. Our women especially are facing a lot of trouble.” (Rohingya male informant)*

Access to water and the importance of water in preventing the spread of COVID-19 was also highlighted.

*“Our number one problem is water. In our block, there are 150 households and we have two damaged hand pumps. Nobody has repaired them, and we have to line up for a long time to get water. We have a very hard time keeping safe during the coronavirus lock down because it is very crowded, and the shelters are very close to each other and we have no water access.” (Rohingya male informant)*

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<sup>1</sup> At the end of March in response to COVID-19, food assistance was changed to primarily rice, lentils, oil and spices. The collection of general food assistance was reduced from twice a month to once a month for both in-kind and e-voucher modalities from distribution sites to avoid congestion and physical contact. <https://www.wfp.org/publications/wfp-bangladesh-external-situation-reports-2020>

#### 4. Social cohesion and safety and security

The main protection concerns raised were problems with the host community over resources, lack of lighting around essential public facilities, theft, registration, and rental challenges. Five male informants raised safety and security as an issue, speaking on behalf of their communities and pointing to increasing tensions both within Rohingya communities and with the host community over resources and an increase in domestic violence.

While these issues existed before COVID-19 service restrictions were implemented, respondents noted that lockdown measures resulted in limited access to essential resources for host communities and refugees, further reducing the effectiveness of existing coping mechanisms.

*“I am facing difficulties in getting rations for my family as my scope card cannot be transferred due to lockdown. We are not allowed to change from Camp 26 to Camp 9 by CiC. We are worried about the shelter because we are staying at my relatives shelter temporarily. We have been staying in Camp 9 since three months ago, but we lived in Mochani (Camp 26) before we moved here.*

*Interviewer: Why did you move from Camp 26 to Camp 9?*

*The reason we moved is because, firstly, I had to pay rent for the land of the shelter for many months. I couldn't afford to pay the rental fees continuously. Secondly, we were under the threat of robbers and gangsters at in that camp. Gangsters kidnapped innocent people and extorted money for them to be released. Some of my relatives and others were also kidnapped by the gangsters at Jadimora and Leda camps. I was also threatened by those gangsters over phone. That's why I moved from Camp 26 to Camp 09.”*

*(Rohingya male informant)*

*“When we try to repair the path nearby our shelters the landlord demands money from us. Without money we are not allowed to build the path. That is number one difficulty for all of us. There are some solar panels around the Block. We have been provided solar panels system lamp posts which were provided two or three years ago. Some of them were damaged around 6-7 months ago. Those services are not working in current situation, but they are very useful for our mothers and sisters in the nighttime for their safety and security...”* (Rohingya male informant)

#### Coping mechanisms:

When faced with problems, most people reported them to the various actors operating in the camps, the majority either directly to NGO Site Management, the Mahjee, the CIC, or a combination of those actors. Those who did not report their issues explained that it was because they did not know who to report to given the current limited presence of humanitarian

and local authorities in the camps. Some were also unsure if most NGOs were still working in the camps or if they had left.

Of those who had reported issues, all stated that their problems remained. The majority (11 informants) said they had not received an explanation or adequate feedback as to whether their problems could be solved and when that would happen, and they were not aware of any other avenues through which to report their issues. This lack of feedback and communication is an understandable source of frustration and humanitarian responders are seen as unreliable. Some respondents noted that they did not trust the Mahjees in their block, either because they did not feel heard or because they reported that the Mahjee in their area is corrupt or prone to favoritism. There were also reports that humanitarian organizations not only failed to help people, but actively prevented them from helping themselves.

*“We refugees are not able to manage our problems without any services. One person complained many times about a very risky problem to the NGO site management, but he didn't get any response from them. There was a person whose shelter was at risk from landslides and the family members raised this issue to site-management, but no response from them. As the shelter is at risk, he built a wall on the risky place by selling his rations, but site management staff destroyed it, saying it was not allowed. Instead of supporting him, they destroyed that wall.”* (Rohingya male informant)

When asked follow-up questions on what community members and their households are doing to manage their problems, the most common responses were:

- Selling food and other assistance to fulfil urgent needs.
- Borrowing from relatives or neighbours.
- Making do by eating less, living with leaky shelters, and sharing household items such as mosquito nets between family members.

These coping mechanisms were commonly employed prior to the pandemic, but the Rohingya's purchasing power has reduced drastically.

*“At first, I tried to solve my problems with the support of NGOs, they just told me that it will be alright soon. After that, I managed my problems myself with my own money, and if I had no money, I would borrow money from relatives.”* (Rohingya male informant)

*“I worked for an NGO previously, I saved some from my salary. But still it is not enough. I divide my food for 30 days. If I need 1 kg of rice, I cook half kg, the remaining half I keep it for tomorrow. If I need two eggs, I cook one. I am not thinking for me, I am sensible. But those who are uneducated and never worked, they don't have money. I am thinking for them.”* (Rohingya male informant)

## Summary comparisons of the top challenges reported in April 2020 in Edition 5:

In April, at the beginning of the lockdown, similar open-ended questions pertaining to people's challenges and concerns were discussed (see Edition 5 [here](#)). Although the sample size is different and direct comparisons cannot be drawn, there are some similarities and differences in the overarching themes.

In April, most respondents were highly concerned about COVID-19, followed closely by access to livelihoods, food, and health care due to the introduction of the COVID-19 containment measures. In June, problems with livelihoods, food access, and water and hygiene facilities remained. Many Rohingya families have been unable to fulfil their basic needs and have been struggling to provide for their families. However, the overwhelming need for housing materials and repairs due to the monsoon was not raised in April (prior to the monsoon), and the lack of support and materials received due to the COVID-19 containment measures is striking.

In June, the Rohingya perceived the secondary impacts of COVID-19 containment measures as a greater threat to their overall wellbeing than COVID-19 itself. While many acknowledged that COVID-19 is a risk, it was secondary to more immediate risks like their shelters collapsing, having safe and accessible toilets, and being able to feed their families.