

Rohingya Relocation to Bhasan Char: An Urban Planning Perspective

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Abstract

The Government of Bangladesh has undertaken the relocation of a segment of the Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs) to *Bhasan Char*, a remote island, following necessary infrastructural developments. This article examines the sustainability of this relocation through the lens of urban planning. Although the island presents both opportunities and challenges, strategic planning, regular monitoring and evaluation, and stakeholder collaboration can help ensure the program's sustainability and improve the lives of the relocated community.

Keywords: Rohingya, Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs), Bhasan Char, Relocation, Urban Planning, Sustainability

Introduction

Bhasan Char, a small remote island in the estuary of the Meghna River came into existence some 20 years ago and has been made livable for the Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMNs) since 2020. The FDMNs are the Rohingya people who fled from the Rakhine State of Myanmar to escape genocide in 2017 (Duran et al., 2023). Since 2017, Bangladesh has been sheltering over a million displaced Rohingya individuals, primarily in the overcrowded camps of Cox's Bazar (UNHCR, 2023).

In Cox's Bazar, the displaced Rohingyas faced overcrowding, inadequate living conditions, inadequate resources, poor sanitation, security issues such as drug smuggling and human trafficking, and frequent conflicts among groups. Environmentally, the camps were highly vulnerable to landslides and flooding, about

215,000 people were at risk, and about 44,000 were in very high-risk zones, further exacerbating concerns about sustainability (Abrar, 2020). To ease congestion and improve living conditions, the Government of Bangladesh initiated the relocation of FDMNs to *Bhasan Char* in 2020, after developing the island with housing, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities (Banerjee, 2023). While some experts see this relocation as a solution to decongestion and improved living conditions, others have raised concerns about the island's isolation, limited mobility, and long-term habitability due to climate change (Asad, 2023). This study explores the opportunities and challenges of relocation to *Bhasan Char* from an urban planning perspective, assessing how it can become a sustainable solution through insights from secondary literature.

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Relocation Site: Overview of the Infrastructural Developments in Bhasan Char

The Government of Bangladesh started infrastructural developments in Bhasan Char with the help of Bangladesh Navy under the Ashrayan-3 project (Molla, 2021). Housing, road network, water reservoir and sanitation, solar-powered electricity, waste management system, mobile network, cyclone shelters etc. facilities were provided to start the relocation process (Illius, 2019).

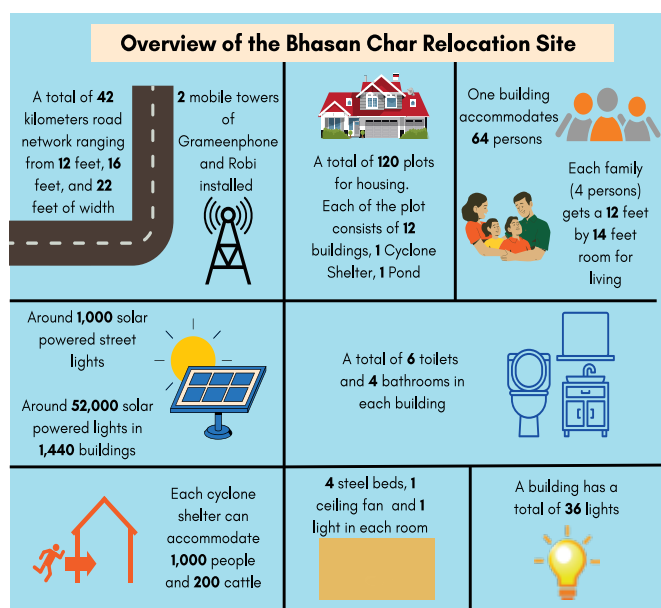


Figure: An infographic prepared based on the information published by Illius (2019)

Opportunities of the Relocation

The relocation of the displaced Rohingya community to *Bhasan Char* has introduced many improvements in living conditions compared to the overcrowded camps in Cox's Bazar. The living conditions in the island are better in terms of housing, sanitation, and safety which mitigates the health and safety hazards (Banerjee, 2023).

Furthermore, the Government and several NGOs are working for economic and livelihood opportunities for these displaced people including farming, fishing and small-scale businesses, enabling refugees to become more economically self-sufficient (Islam et al., 2021; Islam & Barman, 2022). For instance, the Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB) and over 40 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are

currently providing motivational courses and practical training in agriculture, fish farming, sewing, and poultry rearing. Kay Kraft, a fashion house has provided initially three months long training particularly to Rohingya women on cutting, sewing, printing, design, block printing and machine embroidery (UNB, 2021). Moreover, *Bhasan Char* has been constructed as a disaster-resilient area with 9-foot-high embankments against floods and 120 cyclone shelters that offer more protection against natural disasters than the camps in Cox's Bazar, which is highly prone to flooding and landslides (Islam et al., 2021; Smith, 2020). An analysis of historical data has determined that the current configuration of Bhasan Char would not be significantly impacted by a cyclone with a height of 10–15 feet (Gazi et al., 2022). Studies also suggest that the cyclone shelters, embankments and wave protectors are better in Bhasan Char than in nearby islands such as Hatiya and Sandwip (M. T. Islam et al., 2021). These developments suggest that, with continued support, *Bhasan Char* may evolve into a more sustainable and secure habitat for the displaced Rohingya individuals.

Challenges of the Relocation

Despite the improved infrastructure in Bhasan Char, several challenges remain that affect the long-term sustainability and well-being of the relocated Rohingya community. Human rights concerns surrounding Bhasan Char include restricted mobility, which limits access to essential services and economic opportunities, as well as reports that some Rohingyas were relocated without full knowledge of their rights and living conditions, raising ethical and legal issues that call for independent human rights monitoring (Banerjee, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

In terms of an urban planning perspective, the major issue is the uncertainty over the long-term viability of the island. Despite the construction of embankments and protective infrastructure, experts warn that rising sea levels and climate change could make *Bhasan Char* vulnerable to severe weather events in the future (Asad, 2023). Some environmentalists and climate scientists

argue that the island may not be a sustainable long-term solution, especially given the unpredictable impacts of global climate change, and it could be seriously affected by rising sea levels and storm surges.

Additionally, the lack of access to education and health services is another major challenge. Schools and medical facilities have opened, but they are not up to an efficiently designed system, with limited higher education opportunities and specialized healthcare services (Ganguly, 2021). The Rohingya children hardly have the opportunity for secondary-level formal education there, impacting their prospects. In terms of the healthcare system, while services are offered, they do not have higher-level medical equipment (Ganguly, 2021).

Sustainability of the Relocation and Way Forward

The Government of Bangladesh's planning for the relocation of the FDMNs has been both criticized and applauded by different communities. However, now that the relocation has taken place, its sustainability depends on effectively resolving the challenges faced by *Bhasan Char* inhabitants. The strategies of planned relocation can be an essential guideline here.

"Planned relocation is defined as a planned process in which persons or groups of persons move or are assisted to move away from their homes or places of temporary residence, are settled in a new location, and provided with the conditions for rebuilding their lives" (Georgetown University et al., 2017; p.05). It calls for planning, public participation, consultation, and continuous monitoring and evaluation to rebuild the lives of the relocated community.

As the disaster risk of the island inhabitants is among the biggest concerns, efforts from involved stakeholders can contribute to Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) on the island. The following steps should be considered by the host government and the regional and international community:

- Given the geographic isolation and limited resources on the island, it is important to

prioritize disaster preparedness and emergency response planning. Implementing a community-based early warning system and conducting community disaster drills and training (such as first aid, search and rescue operations) with the help of national and international organizations will significantly reduce disaster risk (Major et al., 2021)

- Due to the increasing population on the island, the carrying capacity of the cyclone shelters should be assessed at regular intervals and reinforced accordingly (Lehmann et al., 2021)

- Nature-based Solutions (NbS) can provide cost-effective measures to increase disaster and climate change resilience (Smith et al., 2021). Research projects should be undertaken to analyze the suitable NbS strategies for *Bhasan Char* and implement them accordingly.

- Maintaining emergency stockpiles of food, drinking water, first aid kits, blankets, and fuels in safe and accessible locations is necessary. Moreover, the emergency transportation system and evacuation protocols should be in place.

Along with disaster risk reduction, ensuring sustainable livelihood, healthcare and education system is critical for the long-term sustainability of the relocation program. The following strategies should be considered:

- The soil of the island, made up of sand and silt is infertile (Braun et al., 2021; M. R. Islam et al., 2021). Therefore, along with agriculture, diversification and intensification of livelihood activities are needed. Experts have suggested crab fattening, fish farming, livestock rearing, handicraft and small businesses (M. M. Islam et al., 2022). Engaging Rohingya men and women in productive activities will also reduce crime on the island.

- In addition to strengthening medical facilities on the island, special boats can be designated as water ambulances for emergency transportation to the mainland.

- To enhance educational opportunities, secondary education based on the Burmese curriculum should be introduced, facilitating the reintegration of youth when repatriation occurs.

Conclusion

The relocation of Forcibly Displaced Myanmar Nationals (FDMN) to *Bhasan Char* has provided better living conditions and economic opportunities compared to Cox's Bazar. However, challenges such as climate change and disaster vulnerability, limited education, and healthcare access pose concerns for long-term sustainability. To enhance the resilience of *Bhasan Char*, community-based disaster preparedness measures should be prioritized. Additionally, diversified livelihood programs, improved healthcare, and access to secondary education are crucial for economic self-sufficiency and future reintegration. Continuous monitoring, international cooperation, and adaptive planning are necessary to ensure that *Bhasan Char* remains a sustainable and secure settlement for the FDMNs. By addressing identified challenges, *Bhasan Char* has the potential to serve as a model for future planned relocations in climate-vulnerable regions.

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