



COMMUNITY-BASED PUBLIC LIGHTING FOR ROHINGYA REFUGEES IN BANGLADESH

Lighting, sanitation and the risk of gender-based violence

Case study 1: Bangladesh, Rohingya refugee camps, Cox's Bazaar

What type of lighting was installed, when, where and why?

The congested camps of Cox's Bazaar that accommodate hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees are notoriously difficult to navigate. Steep, narrow paths link thousands of shelters to the main thoroughfares, intersected by ditches and muddy ravines. While some public lighting has been installed in parts of the camp, the majority of residents face almost total darkness after nightfall, when getting around becomes even more treacherous.

'Our children used to be too afraid to go to the toilet in the dark and several injured themselves. One of our boys broke his toe. Sometimes people have missed the path and got lost.'

Oxfam's global research on sanitation lighting and gender-based violence (GBV) in camps has found that lamp posts quickly fall into disrepair, or have valuable parts such as batteries and solar panels stolen, after the initial funding period finishes. It also found that some of these problems can be reduced by using a community-based approach. Oxfam has worked with other agencies to develop a Guidance Note on Lighting for the Rohingya response, which aims to ensure coordination between humanitarian actors and a consistent, community-based approach. This has been endorsed by the protection, shelter/non-food item and site management sectors, with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) indicating that the Guidance Note will be part of the binding agreement to access IOM funding for solar lamp posts.

A woman in Kutupalong



A member of the community lighting Maintenance Group in Kutupalong. Photo: Rachel Hastie/Oxfam.

Oxfam has used this approach in its work with refugees to install lamp posts in specific zones of Kutupalong, Balukhali and Unchiprang camps. The main focus of the work was preparation with the communities in advance of the lights being installed, to maximize their sense of ownership and avoid the pitfalls experienced elsewhere. Oxfam carried out extensive community consultations with women, men, elderly people and children. One of the benefits of involving children was to impress on them the value of the lights and discourage them from throwing stones at the bulbs. Each group was asked about what area they wanted lit as a matter of priority rather than where they wanted lights – as experience had shown that even if installed in the right location, lights had sometimes shone in the wrong direction, effectively making the area that needed to be lit even darker. The different groups found it easy to reach consensus about priority locations for lights: main junctions, steep slopes and narrow bridges.

Authorities tended to prioritize lighting along main thoroughfares, while refugees prioritized the backstreets and residential quarters. Cultural norms limit women and girls to their immediate neighbourhood, so the areas that they have to navigate daily to go to the latrine, bathe and collect water are often not on the main routes. While women in particular wanted to be able to see the pathway to latrines and bathing shelters, they did not want the facilities themselves be too brightly lit, as this would make them too visible when using them, and a ‘moonlight’ atmosphere was favoured – achieved by a lamp post angled to provide indirect light around the facilities.



Lighting of a water point in Unchiprang. Photo: Rachel Hastie/Oxfam.

Oxfam set up Maintenance Groups whose members would build community ownership to protect the lights from vandalism or theft, and clean the solar panels regularly. Oxfam organized training sessions with the contractors installing the lights to ensure they did not make camp residents feel uncomfortable or put them at risk, including strong messages around the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse. The contractors also worked with Oxfam to train the Maintenance Groups on cleaning and other general maintenance, with two or three members responsible for each lamp. The lamps are numbered, and the Maintenance Groups are given a logsheet to record each lamp’s performance every day. As well as keeping track of functioning and any faults, the logsheet shows how different weather patterns affect charging, especially during

the prolonged monsoon season. Bangladesh is prone to cyclones, so the lamp posts have solid concrete foundations that are cyclone-proof, and the poles can easily be unbolted and removed or realigned if required. Some of the lights are on very high poles and this makes it challenging to keep the panels clean, especially during the dry season without rain to wash off the dust off; this may affect how effectively the battery charges. Oxfam is providing ladders which can be tied to the poles to make them more secure, but as yet no completely safe method of cleaning has been identified.

Impact of lighting on refugees’ perceptions of safety

Monitoring carried out two months after the first lights were installed showed that the refugees were overwhelmingly pleased with them. Maintenance Group members support each other and raise awareness about the lights being community assets that everyone needs to protect. In fact, an incident of attempted theft was thwarted when the refugees spotted a thief climbing a lamp post, and alerted the Maintenance Group who then chased him away. The Groups also raise awareness with people living near the lights to prevent any anti-social behaviour such as noisy gatherings late at night, and monitor for light pollution into people’s shelters or any other problems. They also disseminate accurate protection information in their communities and debunk damaging rumours.

Refugees reported that as a result of the lighting they felt less at risk from physical assault, greater confidence negotiating steep paths, were able to do household chores after dark – including cooking and cleaning dishes, which would be especially important during Ramadan – and for men, greater safety when visiting the Mosque after dusk. Women said that they were now able to escape their very hot shelters and could gather socially, under the lamps, in a way they hadn’t been able to before. However – unsurprisingly – there are still far fewer women and older girls in public spaces after dark, and public lighting needs to be complemented by household and individual lighting to adequately cover needs. The Maintenance Groups have played a valuable role in building community ownership of the lamps, but the ability to continually maintain the lamps depends on funding being available.

‘We can now go to the water point any time we like – it means we can have cold water to drink rather than leaving it to warm up in the shelter. This is much better. It is very hot inside – since we’ve had the light, the women come outside to sit by it and keep cool. They gossip with their neighbours. We have a nice community here.’

Maintenance Group member

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