

M A R I A P H I L I P

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“Investigating the applicability of livelihood programming for East Bengali refugees in Kolkata, India”

Background:

Refugee communities worldwide are experiencing increasingly protracted situations of displacement. Given the decline of humanitarian assistance over time, refugees are in pressing need of durable solutions that enable them to meet their essential needs in a sustainable and dignified manner. The humanitarian community has begun to focus greater energy on designing livelihood intervention programs that provide refugees with opportunities to meaningfully partake in income-generating activities. Livelihood interventions have ranged in nature from grants to cash and food-for-work programs, training and placement services, and community contracting. Over the last decade, microfinance and enterprise development initiatives have been advanced as methods to support refugees' endeavors in self-reliance.¹

One demographic in crucial want of long-term livelihood programming is the refugee demographic from present-day Bangladesh that populates the southern slums of Kolkata, India. Following the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, and most recently after the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, East Bengali Hindus have inundated the border of India's West Bengal, founding squatter colonies alongside railways, canals, and streets in its capital.² Inadequate relief and rehabilitation programs left the refugees, many of whom were unfamiliar with urban life, bereft of opportunities for economic productivity and social mobility. Their plight persists to this day, as self-identifying East Bengali refugees and their descendants comprise 17% of Kolkata's slum households.³

Proposal:

This project proposes to conduct a field-based investigation of the local conditions that East Bengali refugees in Kolkata face in order to ascertain the livelihood intervention programs that would most effectively alleviate the community's vulnerabilities and help it to achieve self-sufficiency. The principal objective of the project is to survey the central challenges that have prevented the refugee population's full socio-economic integration into local urban society. Once the legal, social, and economic impediments to and potentials of the refugee population have been identified, the project will secondarily consider possible correctives. If the demand and prospect for microfinance is discovered to exist, the project will develop a strategy of graduated intervention that will aim to foster the conditions necessary for a viable microfinance operation.

Project Goals:

¹Azorbo, Michelle. *Microfinance and refugees: lessons learned from UNHCR's experience*. Research Paper No. 199. Policy Development and Evaluation Service. UNHCR. 2001.

²Kudaisya, Gyanesh. "Divided Landscapes, Fragmented Identities: East Bengal Refugees and Their Rehabilitation In India, 1947–79." *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 17.1 (1996): 24-39.

³Kundu, Nitai. "The Case of Kolkata, India." *Global Report on Human Settlements: The Challenges of Slums*. UN-Habitat. 2003.

The project hopes to pioneer a comprehensive, contemporary study of the East Bengali refugee situation in Kolkata. It intends to contribute to a burgeoning field of humanitarian activity in which nongovernmental organizations, government policy makers, and local community actors are shifting away from dependence on traditional relief assistance towards context-specific livelihood programming.

Tools and Methods:

I must first examine the factors most associated with the success and failure of each type of livelihood intervention. As preparation, I have already examined three critical resources—the Women’s Refugee Commission’s “Building Livelihoods” field manual, UNHCR’s “Promoting Livelihoods and Self-Reliance” handbook for urban operations, and the Department for International Development’s “Sustainable Livelihoods Framework.” I must expand my research base to include case studies on livelihood interventions in conflict-affected communities; the impact reports of humanitarian organizations working in India; and the operational models of South Asian development and microfinance institutions.

In order to frame the context for a livelihood intervention, I will map the institutions and cultural practices that significantly affect Kolkata’s East Bengali refugee community by performing a two-phase situational analysis and a market assessment. Both of these processes will involve the systematic examination of secondary sources, direct observation of the activities that occur within refugee colony communities, and consultation of key stakeholders.

For the first phase of the situational analysis, I must use population profiles, legal documents, government reports, and nongovernmental agency publications to answer the following questions regarding the host society’s policies towards refugee integration:

- In which of south Kolkata’s administrative wards are East Bengali refugees primarily concentrated?
- What are the local laws that impact East Bengali refugees, specifically their right to work and access the local labor market?
- What regional, national, and local organizations provide refugee services in the area and what resources do they make available to East Bengali refugees?
- What is the quality of the human rights environment in Kolkata and have there been documented episodes of discrimination against the refugee population?
- What, if any, are the development projects currently underway in Kolkata and which demographics do they benefit?

Through site-visits to the most densely populated East Bengali refugee colonies and dialogues with diverse members of the refugee population—including men, women, young adults, the elderly, and the disabled—I will be able to collect information on the population’s needs, concerns, and goals. Thus, the second-phase of the situational analysis entails the determination of the following:

- The coping mechanisms and livelihood strategies that refugee households currently employ in order to offset food and income insecurity and meet essential needs.
- The gamut of human, social, economic, natural, and physical capital that is presently contained within refugee settlements. Most importantly, the existing skills and assets that enable the community to capitalize on formal employment opportunities.
- The function of organizational structures that operate within the refugee colonies and their roles in fostering a sense of solidarity within the refugee community.

- The division of labor between the sexes within refugee households. Specifically, whether the domestic duties of women and girls affect their capacity to work beyond the confines of the home.
- The economic programs that refugees believe best benefit their situation.

An understanding of market dynamics is imperative to the creation of viable pathways to East Bengali refugees' long-term self-sufficiency. A market study will identify constraints to and possibilities for their economic integration by asking the following:

- What are refugees' primary sources of income and what commercial activities do they presently undertake?
- Do refugees have access to informal money-lenders or community-based credit associations?
- Which marketplaces are most accessible to the refugees? Are there any barriers, such as poor road conditions or high transportation costs, that make access to these commercial spaces difficult?
- What goods and services are most in demand in these marketplaces?
- What and how stable is the current rate of inflation?

For the sake of feasibility, I will delimit the scope of the market assessment to the commercial spaces that are frequented by the greatest number of East Bengali refugees. In addition to reviewing published economic data, I will also interview select business leaders and marketplace merchants in order to sufficiently answer these queries.

Value of the Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group (CRG):

Affiliation with the CRG would not only allow me to access the organization's vast database, but would also endow the project with the credibility necessary to approach government officials and nongovernmental agency personnel. A supervisor will be an extremely valuable asset in facilitating my research, particularly by familiarizing me with the geography of Kolkata and the cultural norms of the city's local and refugee populations. I will also be able to appeal to my supervisor for assistance in creatively confronting any methodological challenges that may arise along the course of my research period. I expect to encounter a language barrier whilst performing fieldwork, given my inability to adequately speak Bengali or Hindi, and the CRG is primed to introduce me to local community actors who can translate the questionnaires I will develop for, and act as interpreters during, my interviews.

Result and Potential Impact:

Upon completion of the project, I will produce a paper that details the results of my two assessments and includes a memorandum prescribing a particular livelihood intervention strategy. My aspiration is for this policy prescription to provide international, national, and local actors—particularly the CRG—with a platform from which to launch an advocacy campaign on behalf of the long-neglected East Bengali refugee population. I further aim to convince relevant decision makers in India, such as the West Bengal Ministry of Minority Affairs and Madrasah Education and the Kolkata Municipal Corporation, that the economic productivity spurred by refugee-centric livelihood programming would contribute to the social, emotional, and economic well-being of both the East Bengali refugee population and the greater poverty-stricken metropolitan community.

Appendix:

Cash-for-work: Provisional employment opportunities in which laborers receive a daily wage in exchange for the reconstruction and infrastructure development projects they perform within their community.

Cash grants: the distribution of non-repayable financial entitlements to low income individuals with minimal economic assets.

Community contracting: for-work projects in which an organization within a displaced community and an external funding source agree to jointly implement a development project that benefits the displaced population.

Food-for-work: Provisional employment opportunities in which laborers receive food or other goods and services, in lieu of cash, as compensation for participation in some community-building project.

Microfinance: the provision of financial services—including microcredit loans, microinsurance, and savings programs— to low income individuals who lack access to formal financial institutions. Microcredit is a popular recourse for poor entrepreneurs in need of enterprise development capital.

Training and placement services: the provision of vocational and business training, access to apprenticeships, and job placement opportunities.

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