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ABSTRACT

*International refugees constitute the polar opposite of people having access to land and livelihoods, who are thus in a position to strive for food sovereignty. They constitute a limiting case of those excluded from the corporate food regime who lack not only the purchasing power but also the rights and entitlements of citizenship. Consequently, the pursuit of food sovereignty in the conventional sense is **not an option** for refugees who lack the necessary rights and entitlements for invoking that concept in the first place. At best, refugees may hope that the host state and international aid agencies will arrange for their food security, rather than demand it as a matter of right. However, even though they lack land and citizenship rights, do refugees have any room for manoeuvre at all, in terms of devising their own avenues of attaining food security, if not food sovereignty?*

These issues are explored through a concrete case study of the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar (Burma) in Bangladesh. The expulsion of these people was propelled by long-standing ethno-religious conflicts, reinforced by ongoing primitive accumulation through land grabs, triggered by the impacts of neoliberal globalization on Myanmar. The discussion focuses upon the diverse ways in which different categories of refugees have attempted to attain food security in Bangladesh and the constraints that they have faced in the process. The implications of the analysis for an alternative notion of food sovereignty, suited to the predicament of landless and rightless groups such as international refugees, are drawn out in conclusion.

THE ISSUES AND THE CONTEXT

International refugees: A limiting context for food sovereignty

International refugees consist of population groups that have been expelled from their own country and deprived of their means of subsistence. Typically, refugees have a prior history of persecution, dispossession and forced migration that have separated them from their own lands and other resources needed for producing or procuring food. Such processes of separation from land and other assets can correspond to notions of primitive accumulation (Marx 1976) or accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2005) in the context of long term capitalist development.

Unlike internally displaced people (IDP), international refugees do not even have any nominal rights in their destination states. While their situation may improve over time, at the outset they have no automatic or inherent rights to stay, to own land, or the right to work and procure food through market exchange. As alien non-citizens, refugees have no entitlement or claims to food security.

Furthermore, refugees subject to continuing violence and intimidation threatening their lives are faced with not just food insecurity, but a situation of total insecurity. Such pervasive protection risks can prevail not only in the homelands that they have fled but also in the destination countries where they have sought shelter, e.g. refugees may be hunted down by security forces in their destinations for forced repatriation to their own countries.

Typologically, international refugees constitute the polar opposite of people having access to land and livelihoods and hence in a position to strive for food sovereignty. They constitute a limiting case of those excluded from the corporate food regime who lack not only the purchasing power but also the rights and entitlements of citizens. Consequently, the pursuit of food sovereignty in the conventional sense is *not an option* for refugees who lack the basic rights and entitlements necessary for invoking that concept in the first

place (McMichael 2013:2-5; Akram-Lodhi 2013:1-3).¹ At best, refugees may hope that the host state and international humanitarian organizations will arrange for their food security, rather than demand it as a matter of right. However, even though they lack land and citizenship rights, do the refugees have any room for manoeuvre in terms of devising their own avenues of attaining food security, if not food sovereignty?

These issues are explored through a concrete case study of the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar (Burma) in Bangladesh. The expulsion of these refugees was propelled by long-standing ethno-religious conflicts, reinforced by current primitive accumulation through land grabs, triggered by the influence of neoliberal globalization on Myanmar. The discussion focuses upon the diverse ways in which the refugees have attempted to attain food security in Bangladesh and the constraints that they have faced in the process. The implications of the analysis for an alternative notion of food sovereignty suited to the predicament of landless and rightless groups such as international refugees, are drawn out in conclusion.

Exodus of refugees from Myanmar

There has been widespread exodus of refugees from the different states and divisions of Myanmar to countries of the surrounding region, including Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, India and Bangladesh. Expulsion of refugees has been propelled by a complex set of factors, varying between different conflict zones in Burma characterized by particular ethno-religious and socio-demographic fault lines.

The Rohingyas constitute a Muslim minority living among ethnically distinct Buddhist Rakhines in north Rakhine (Arakan) state of Myanmar, which lies along the international border with Bangladesh. Their darker skin colour compared to most of the Burmese population has provided scope for racist attitudes and discrimination (cf. Lunn 2012:11-13). The Rohingya were denied citizenship of Myanmar by a law enacted by its military government, effectively reducing their status to that of a stateless group (Hudson-Rodd & Htay 2008: 61; Lunn 2012: 11). They were denied 'the right to own land or property', amounting to a total land grab and subjected to many forms of discrimination in their everyday existence (COHRE 2007: 82). The Rohingyas were exposed to forced labour and routine violence including rape and killings, and also required to get permission for even matters concerning their personal lives such as getting married (Lewa 2011:ii).

In addition to routine persecution and ethnic discrimination, intensified repression by the Burmese military state led to two massive waves of Rohingya refugees fleeing to neighbouring Bangladesh. The first in 1978 involved Operation Naga Min (King Dragon), which officially aimed to categorize 'each individual within the state as either a citizen or alleged "illegal immigrant", ... [but also] resulted in widespread rape, arbitrary arrests, desecration of mosques, destruction of villages and confiscation of lands [of] the Rohingya people' (Lunn 2012: 12; Smith 2002: 19). Around 250,000 refugees fled to neighbouring Bangladesh, 'many of whom were later repatriated to Myanmar where they faced further torture, rape, jail and death'.

Another wave of predatory state violence in 1991-92 under Operation Pyi Thaya (Clean and Beautiful Nation) led to the influx of 200,000 Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh (Lunn 2012: 12; Smith 2002: 19). Violence against the Rohingyas by Buddhist Rakhines and Burmese security forces erupted yet again during May-June 2012, resulting in 'killings, mass arrests and looting' (Lunn 2012: 7-9). Violence against them has continued intermittently up to 2013. The cumulative consequences of such state violence and ethno-religious conflict has led to the prolonged residence of a significant population of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.² These actions of the Burmese state are symptomatic of a policy of 'ethnic cleansing' of the Rohingyas, resulting in

¹ Not even in the more operational sense of sovereignty: 'The conventional definition of sovereignty is having supreme authority within a territory, but a more contemporary definition of sovereignty would be to have independent and exclusive de facto practical authority over a space' (Akram-Lodhi 2013:4, citing Philpott 2010).

² Also in other adjoining countries, particularly Thailand (Lunn 2012: 7).

land grabs and large-scale ‘population displacement’.³

While originating in such ethnic, religious and political conflicts rooted in the history of Myanmar, forcible expulsion of Rohingyas has also resulted from current land grabs triggered by neoliberal policy objectives, reflecting a combination of ‘productive, speculative or even political motives’ (McMichael 2013:11; cf. Minkoff-Zern 2013:5)

In 1991, the Burmese military regime began to provide large blocks of land on 30-year leases to private parties for commercial plantations and agribusinesses (COHRE 2007:103). From 1999, the successor regime encouraged a massive programme of commercial farming and plantations by foreign capital and national entrepreneurs (Hudson-Rodd and Htay 2008: 85-88; Woods 2013:3). Lands needed for these were carved out of ‘vast areas of vacant, virgin and fallow lands’ in a process termed as the ‘opening up’ of “cultivable waste land” (Hudson-Rodd & Htay 2008: 86; Woods 2013:2). However, in practice, these were often lands used by individual households and communities for their livelihoods, which were confiscated by the military state and sold or leased to private companies (COHRE 2007:106; Woods 2013:2).

Such neoliberal land confiscation for allotment to private companies has also taken place in the Rakhine (Arakan) State of Myanmar.⁴ For instance, funds have been invested by the Vietnamese agriculture ministry for a 120,000 acre rubber plantation concession, to be implemented by several Vietnamese corporations (Woods 2013:20-21). Thus, displacement of the local population in Rakhine state by commercial land grabs has linked up with the long-standing expulsion of Rohingyas stoked by ethno-religious conflicts and state violence, jointly contributing to the stream of international refugees fleeing to Bangladesh (Woods 2013:21).

Situation of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh

The area where Rohingya refugees from Myanmar cross the international border to enter Bangladesh is the Cox’s Bazar district, lying at the extreme southeast of the country (Map //). Even though some of the refugees have moved on to other areas, their highest concentration continues to be in Cox’s Bazar. It is also one of the poorest and least developed districts of Bangladesh, such that large sections of the local (host) community are not much better off than the destitute refugees (//). The coastal plains, forests and hill ecosystems of Cox’s Bazar have been under increasing stress due to the high population density and extractive activities of its own local communities.

In parallel, the Cox’s Bazar region has been significantly influenced by neoliberal globalization. The small seaport of Cox’s Bazar is the premier tourist resort of Bangladesh, constituting a major site of investment and speculation in urban real estate. Capitalization of the rural interior by real estate developers and foreign and domestic corporations has grown rapidly to cover the entire coastal belt, with land being increasingly transformed into a financial asset for speculative gains (McMichael 2013:10).

The policies of Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority country, towards successive waves of Muslim Rohingya refugees has changed since the 1970s. After an initial phase of welcoming the Rohingyas due to religious and cultural affinity, the Bangladeshi state was unable and unwilling to take on the burden of harbouring and feeding the increasing numbers on its own. Attempts at forced repatriation (refoulment) have not been very effective because such returnees have faced persecution in Myanmar and fled to Bangladesh yet again (Lewa 2011). Even though they have left behind their lands and livelihoods, returning home is not an option for the

³ Lunn (2012:7-13), citing The Guardian, 10 November 2012.

⁴ Land grabs have been taking place all across Myanmar, including the Rakhine (Arakan) (COHRE 2007: 72 and 103), Kachin (Woods 2011: 759-760; COHRE 2007: 72), Shan (Woods 2011: 759-760; COHRE 2007: 70), Mon (COHRE 2007: 106), and Karenni (COHRE 2007: 103) States.

Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar.

Furthermore, Rohingyas who have entered Bangladesh after 1992 have not been formally given refugee status by the government, even though international law and practices would regard them as refugees irrespective of their official status (WFP & UNHCR 2012:ix). The lack of formal status as registered refugees made such Rohingyas vulnerable to abuse and arbitrary deportation without any legal recourse. In any case, all refugees in Bangladesh were subject to considerable 'protection risks' in terms of violence and extortion in the places where they stayed as well as when travelling, as indicated below.

Formerly the Rohingya refugees had been mostly peasants in Myanmar, differentiated in terms of their wealth and class status. After arriving in Bangladesh, they were all levelled in terms of the common predicament of meeting basic food needs, irrespective of their earlier status and economic conditions. While their access to food was a matter of sheer survival, they were devoid of any entitlements based on citizenship rights and ownership of land. Furthermore, the Bangladesh government did not formally allow the Rohingya refugees to seek avenues of survival through employment, or access any of the welfare facilities provided by the state.

Given this context, the ways in which the Rohingyas accessed food depended crucially upon (i) their status as registered or unregistered refugees and (ii) the sites in which they were located, ranging from official and unofficial camps to settlements of the local population. On this basis, the refugees can be divided into three categories (WFP & UNHCR 2012: viii), whose numbers have fluctuated over time with changing circumstances (Lewa 2011):

1. First, there are an estimated 24,500 *registered* refugees currently living in two *official* camps in Nayapara and Kutupalong, run by the government under the auspices of UNHCR (Category A).
2. Second, there are two other *unofficial* 'makeshift' sites in Kutupalong and Leda with approximately *unregistered* refugees in *unofficial* (Category B) *unofficial*⁵.
3. Third, *unregistered* Rohingyas are dispersed among the local (host) population in the villages and towns of Cox's Bazar as well as adjoining districts, particularly Bandarban and Chittagong (Category C).⁶ Estimates of their total numbers range from 200,000 to 400,000, and they constitute the overwhelming majority of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh (Lewa 2011:44).

Among these, only Category A consisting of registered refugees in official camps received food from international aid agencies, administered by the government. The unregistered refugees in Categories B and C did not receive food assistance from international agencies.⁷ While both groups were left to fend for themselves, Categories B and C survived under very different circumstances, leading to contrasting outcomes, as noted below.

⁵ The Kutupalong makeshift site had 20,500 unregistered Rohingyas in December 2010 (Lewa 2011:i)

⁶ See Lewa (2011) for an assessment of the geographical distribution of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh by administrative units and estimated numbers.

⁷ With the exception of nutritional food supplements delivered by WFP and various NGOs for specific target groups that include both refugees and the local population.

MEANS OF ACCESSING FOOD BY DIFFERENT REFUGEE GROUPS

Refugees in official camps receiving food rations

Registered refugees living in the official camps (Category A) are permitted by the government to receive food rations. These are mainly funded and delivered by international aid organizations. Distribution in the camps is undertaken in collaboration with government agencies (WFP & UNHCR 2012:ix). The food items are procured from international and national markets by corporate contractors. The composition and volume of the food rations are determined by the concerned international aid agencies. The recipient refugees do not have any choice or control over this bundle of items and must 'take it or leave it'.⁸ This system of delivery of rations to registered refugees in official camps can be regarded as a small component of the global corporate food regime.

However, even though supplied with rations, the Category A refugees were involved in economic activities that enabled them to access other sources of food. To a limited extent, they could produce food inside the camps and buy specific food items from markets outside by selling their own products and services, as well as items among the rations received that they did not want. In some instances, refugee women made earnings by undertaking prostitution inside and outside the camps.

In addition to selling some of their rations in the market, registered refugees in the official camps shared their food with family members who were not yet registered and eligible for such supplies (/////). They also donated some of their food rations to other refugees who did not receive such assistance and were forced to beg for survival (Lewa 2011:25). Overall, nearly half of the registered refugees sold, exchanged or shared their 'food rations, mainly to diversify diets, finance non-food items and repay loans' (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xiii, fn).

The staying power resulting from receipt of official food assistance enabled the registered refugees to engage in less risky employment with higher wages and cope better with crisis situations compared to their unregistered counterparts (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xiv). For instance, they could borrow by mortgaging the identity documents ('family books') determining their entitlement to food rations. Such options enabled the Category A refugees to accumulate assets, leading to greater wealth compared to most unregistered refugees in Categories B and C (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xiv-xvii). This generated resentment against the registered refugees among the unregistered ones as well as the host community.

Overall, the registered refugees became dependent on official food assistance. The existence of this safety net served to inhibit them from searching for alternative livelihoods to ensure their food security, unlike the unregistered refugees (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xxi). Furthermore, given their stake in the food rationing system, these refugees were unable to protest against illicit or inappropriate practices during food distribution in their camps (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xvii-xviii).

Unregistered refugees in unofficial makeshift sites

The unregistered refugees in the two makeshift camps (Category B) suffered from not only the absence of any food assistance, but also the lack of substantial avenues of livelihood in and around these overcrowded sites. They had little choice but to defy the official restrictions imposed upon them, seeking work and travelling to other locations in order to procure food whenever feasible.

⁸ Towards the end of 2013, moves were being made to give 'untied purchasing power' to the refugees by means of an electronic cash card through which they could obtain a fixed value of food from designated outlets in the camps. This arrangement would give them a certain degree of choice about the composition and amount of the commodities that they 'bought' with their cards.

The men in the makeshift sites worked as daily wage labourers in local farms and villages, or as short term contract labourers in logging in forests (Lewa 2011:iii). Some worked as rickshaw-pullers or fishermen (Lewa 2011:26). Overall, the major options for ensuring food security were through wage work and petty self-employment, subsuming different contractual forms. However old men selling vegetables and cakes did not usually earn enough to feed their families; others simply begged, living on charity (Lewa 2011:24-25).

For women and children living in the makeshift sites, the limited livelihood options were collecting firewood in nearby hills and forests for market sale, working as housemaids in the official refugee camps, or simply begging (Lewa 2011:iii, 24). Such firewood collection by refugees damaged the forest environment in their surroundings, which adversely affected the local population as well. Apart from these, a few refugee women produced and sold fishing nets and cakes in and around the makeshift site, while some women resorted to prostitution (Lewa 2011:24). In these instances, access to food was mediated by *market* transactions involving *self-employment* to produce and sell goods or sexual services.

Given the relative lack of income-earning opportunities, the unregistered refugees living in the unofficial makeshift sites experienced chronic hunger and high levels of malnutrition (Lewa 2011: 22, 38).⁹ The lack of official food assistance and the difficulties faced by refugees in earning and transferring incomes to their families resulted in persistent food insecurity.

The situation worsened during a crackdown on Rohingyas by security forces during 2007-08, when unregistered refugees from other areas fell back on the unofficial campsites for better protection against arrest, detention and deportation (Lewa 2011:ii). Correlatively, when the security situation improved, individual members of refugee families travelled outside in search of work and access to food. Their options were differentiated by age and sex.

Adult males sought employment in the safety of nearby towns (Cox's Bazar and Chittagong) and the rural interior of other districts of Bangladesh (Lewa 2011:iv). Young Rohingya boys were sent to work as farm labourers or tea boys in distant locations beyond the boundaries of Cox's Bazar (Lewa 2011:35). Many women had to become sole breadwinners of their families for extended periods because their husbands and other male family members had gone to work in distant locations and could not return regularly with their earnings due to threats of arrest, harassment and extortion on the way (Lewa 2011:24).

Furthermore, individual women and girls (even as young as 8-12 years) were sent away from their families to work as live-in housemaids, sometimes to distant cities such as Chittagong and Dhaka (Lewa 2011: iii-iv, 26). Such avenues of meeting basic food needs also exposed these women and girls to mistreatment and sexual harassment by their employers as well as risks of trafficking (Lewa 2011:iii-iv, 26-35).

Protection risks

These Rohingya refugees lived under continuous threats that exacerbated their food insecurity, including arbitrary arrest, assault, robbery, eviction, deportation, and extortion of their money incomes and resources (Lewa 2011:28; WFP & UNHCR 2012:xvi-xvii). The perpetrators included officials and functionaries of government including the police and forestry departments, criminal elements, and even individuals among the *refugees* themselves (Lewa 2011:iii, 28).

The capability of the refugees to earn incomes and access food was particularly constrained by the risks of travelling and resultant restrictions on (labour) mobility. The police and forestry officials at check-posts along

⁹ The Global Acute Malnutrition rate in the Kutapalong makeshift camp in October 2010 was 30%, much higher than the emergency threshold of 15% designated by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Lewa 2011:iv). Hunger was reported by 85% of the respondents in this makeshift site (Lewa 2011:38).

the main roads arbitrarily detain Rohingyas, particularly those returning to families with their earnings, in order to extract bribes under threats of arrest and deportation (Lewa 2011:iii, 29-36). Even in order to obtain bail for the arrested Rohingyas, fees or bribes had to be paid to lawyers, police and court functionaries, further accentuating their lack of access to food. With male breadwinners under arrest, the women and children of their families were compelled to fend for themselves, exacerbating food insecurity and physical vulnerability.

Refugee women and girls faced additional risks of rape and sexual assault, particularly from local males, when they went out of their camps or makeshift settlements to work outside. In particular, this has occurred repeatedly when they went to collect firewood in nearby hills and forests (Lewa 2011:iii, 24). And yet gathering and selling firewood was one of the few options of survival available to women and girls, compelling them to continue to take such risks for accessing food for their families.

Unregistered Rohingya refugees dispersed among the local population

The bulk of the Rohingya refugees have integrated with local society in the villages and towns of Cox's Bazar and adjoining districts (Category C). Many of them have obtained temporary or permanent employment in the wider economy, and some have acquired land and other property (Lewa 2011: iv, 45). Their access to food has been based on various forms of wage- and self-employment and, in some cases, property ownership.

To illustrate, Rohingya women and girls work in fish- and shrimp-processing units and garments factories in Cox's Bazar and Chittagong districts, including Chittagong city (Lewa 2011:25-26). Other women work in horticultural plantations and fish drying processes in various locations. Some of the Rohingya women depend on transactional sex and begging, particularly when their husbands are not present because of being arrested or working elsewhere (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xiii).

Rohingya men work in Cox's Bazar and the adjoining districts of Chittagong division including the Chittagong Hill Tracts, as well as more distant location such as Sylhet district and the national capital, Dhaka (Lewa 2011:26). Cox's Bazar town and its surroundings provide plentiful casual labour for the refugees, particularly in the construction and fishing sectors (Lewa 2011:26, 51). Rickshaw-pulling and hotel construction jobs in Cox's Bazar town are dominated by refugee men while the women participate in microcredit programmes.

Rohingya men work for wages in fishing trawlers in the coastal areas, tied to their boat-owning employers by debt bondage as well as clientelist relations providing them with protection against threats of deportation to Myanmar (Lewa 2011:26). Refugee men are contracted for weeks or months for logging and bamboo extraction in deep forests, based on an initial advance for the food and other needs of their families during their absence (Lewa 2011:27). Rohingyas who had moved to the Bandarban district of the Chittagong Hill Tracts have taken part in multiple income-earning activities including logging, cutting of bamboo, working on farms and plantations, rickshaw-pulling and casual wage labour in urban centres (Lewa 2011:53). Some of them had been able to buy or take possession of plots of land in the CHT to construct homesteads.

The Rohingya refugees of Category C were thus involved in a wide range of economic activities spread out over different parts of Bangladesh and its marine waters. These included risk-prone activities such as 'high-sea fishing and unloading of ships' as well as logging and extraction of bamboo in remote forests (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xi). They also worked in labour-intensive activities such as agriculture, salt production and construction in urban centres.

The refugees worked in different locations in different seasons, moving around in accordance with shifting demand (Lewa 2011:26). Multiple ties of wage employment, mediated by clientelist relations with their employers, constituted their strategy for ensuring food security. However, they showed a preference for

working in locations distant from Cox's Bazar, where there was no surveillance and checks for illegal immigrants. These were also places where they could mingle with the local population without having to reveal their identity.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTENTIONS

Clientelist relations and protection

Wherever necessary, the Rohingya refugees made payments to access jobs, transportation and safe passage, passports and national identity documents, land and other resources. Accepting lower wages and poorer job conditions compared to local workers was part of the same strategy of making themselves wanted in an alien land (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xi). Consequently, there has been continuing demand for the labour and services of the Rohingyas and their participation in the labour market has not been restricted so far, despite most of them being unregistered and 'illegal' (Lewa 2011: v, 46).

Employers and landlords who benefit economically from the availability of unregistered refugees are their main patrons, providing them with protection against police raids and arrests as well as threats of repatriation to Myanmar (Lewa 2011: iv, 45). 'Boat owners have been known to pay protection money to the police and negotiate release of their Rohingya fishing crew' (Lewa 2011:49). They have also allowed the fish workers to live on peripheral land on the coast, while tying and exploiting them through debt bondage. The refugee workers have developed such long term clientelist relationships with their employer-patrons, returning to work on their boats during the fishing season every year. Correspondingly, after the crackdown on refugees in Cox's Bazar town by the police in January 2010, it was the local rickshaw owners and contractors who negotiated the release of their Rohingya rickshaw-pullers and construction workers respectively (Lewa 2011:51).

In a similar form of patronage, Rohingya women were able to enter micro-credit programmes with a recommendation from their landlords (Lewa 2011:55). Significantly, refugee women living in local villages communities, as contrasted to makeshift sites, have experienced lesser extent of rape and sexual assault when collecting firewood in the surrounding hills (Lewa 2011:51). This is suggestive of a certain degree of local social protection from their host community.

However, the refugees also faced extortion in the form of 'protection money' demanded by local authorities and powerholders (Lewa 2011: iv, 45). Significantly, such payments to the police, border guards, officials and local patrons also helped to sustain pragmatic clientelist relations that enabled the refugees to continue working and thereby meet their food needs. Indeed, the Rohingya refugees have been able to stay and *access food*, precisely because they provide labour, services and sources of surplus extraction to powerholders, state officials and security forces, often through exploitative transactions and relationships.

Overall, pursuit of livelihood activities and strategies by the Rohingya refugees has depended upon multiple localized and informal systems of protection, based on clientelist relations with local authorities, elite groups, community leaders and religious functionaries (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xvii).

Discrimination and hostility towards Rohingya refugees

Rohingya refugees have also experienced varying degrees of discrimination and hostility from the state and local population of Cox's Bazar district. To the extent that these threaten their livelihood options and *de facto* residence in Bangladesh, such factors can also potentially undermine their food security.

A recurrent complaint by the host community has been that the Rohingya refugees have worked at lower rates and in riskier job conditions compared to those acceptable to local workers, thereby undercutting them

in the local labour market (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xi). The fact that the unregistered refugee workers did not have the requisite legal status and protective cover made them vulnerable to political opposition from the adversely affected segments of the local community.

There have been recurrent protests by locals against labour competition from the Rohingya workers and agitation to ban them from participating in the labour market (Lewa 2011:46-55). Such pressures have begun to threaten the livelihoods and food security of the refugees in Bangladesh. In some instances, restrictions have been imposed on Rohingyas working in specific occupations such as rickshaw-pulling and industrial work in garments factories. Even the state authorities have imposed restrictions barring access of the refugees to institutional facilities that provide avenues of accessing food. For instance, refugee women have been barred from accessing micro-credit schemes which would have allowed them to earn incomes and procure food for their families.¹⁰

Significantly, large number of the Rohingya refugees had been helped to enroll as 'voters' in illegal ways as a form of patronage bestowed by political parties which wanted them to serve as their vote banks (Lewa 2011:16). However, approximately 100,000 such Rohingyas were systematically disenfranchised during the voter registration checks in 2007-08 and the subsequent updating of the electoral rolls by the Election Commission under the supervision of the Bangladesh army (Lewa 2011:16-18). Exclusion from the voters' list also meant that the concerned refugees would not be able to serve as loyal vote banks, thus delinking them from the patronage and protection of local politicians and their party organizations (Lewa 2011:16).

Exclusion from the electoral rolls and the related denial of national identity cards to the Rohingyas formalised their loss of political protection and increased their vulnerability to arrests, abuse and extortion by the security forces as well as local powerholders and criminals (Lewa 2011:ii, 45). For instance, they were made the target of intimidation and extortion by the local bosses of a powerful political party, whose cadres handed over individual refugees to the security forces for deportation (Lewa 2011:52-54).

Since 2010, there has been continuing agitation against the very presence of Rohingyas in Bangladesh by political interests and local media keen to incite anti-immigrant sentiments. Anti-refugee feelings among the local populations has also been intensified by the continuing influx of Rohingyas from Myanmar, exacerbating the pressure of the existing refugee population on the scarce resources available (Lewa 2011: v, 55).

While organized violence targetting the refugees has not been reported, they have experienced discriminated from the local population (Lewa 2011:2). Some instances of aggressive agitation against the Rohingyas were observed during 2010, with loudspeaker announcements calling for their expulsion from villages (Lewa 2011:49-50). Individual landlords evicted Rohingyas from their rented homesteads, symptomatic of the rupture of clientelist relations with locally influential people providing the refugees with protection.

Earlier on, the Rohingya refugees had been able to merge with the local population with whom they shared a common religion and had close affinity in terms of language and culture. However, the sense of security generated by such 'invisibility' among the local populace has been partly undermined by recent developments. Such factors include state persecution against them as illegal or 'undocumented Myanmar nationals' as well as resentment among the host population against their competition in the labour market (Lewa 2011:21, 58).

¹⁰ The rules have been modified to require a national ID card or birth certificate in order to be eligible for entry into such programmes (Lewa 2011: v). Cf. Minkoff-Zern (2013:7-10).

COMPARATIVE OUTCOMES: ACCESS TO FOOD

The means of accessing food varied between different groups of the Rohingyas in Bangladesh. Only a very small proportion of refugees, who were registered and lived in official camps (Category A), benefited from food rations provided by international aid agencies. Delivery of rations contributed to the food security of these registered refugees and influenced their other economic choices.

The bulk of the refugees were unregistered and did not receive any food rations and hence devised their own mechanisms of accessing food through interactions with local markets and social-political networks. Among them, the outcomes varied between those living in makeshift sites (Category B) and the overwhelming majority dispersed among the local communities (Category C). The key determinants of the outcomes in terms of food security and dietary diversity were the economic activities and relationships that were feasible for these different groups of refugees (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xx-xxi).

Not surprisingly, registered refugees (Category A) had greater diversity in their food items compared to the unregistered ones in the makeshift sites (Category B), who had higher malnutrition rates (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xix). 'Food assistance contributed directly to this dietary diversity, because rations could be sold, shared or exchanged' and also used for obtaining loans to buy other food items (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xix).

The unregistered Rohingyas in the makeshift campsites (Category B) were the most food-insecure and the most vulnerable in terms of protection risks among all refugee groups (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xxi). Their high concentration in a small area, where they outnumbered the local population and contributed to the degradation of common resources through deforestation, overfishing, and pollution of water sources resulted in their lack of protection and food security.

It is striking that the unregistered refugees who had assimilated with local communities (Category C) had more diversified diets compared to even the registered refugees receiving official food rations (Category A) (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xviii-xix, Table 4). Moreover, 'Almost twice as many Rohingyas living in local communities had four or more food groups in their diets than did unregistered Rohingyas in makeshift sites' (Category B) (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xviii). This suggests that refugees branching out on their own and finding avenues of survival in the local economy and society had been able to access better *food security* and informal protection systems compared to those living in the official camps and makeshift sites (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xxi). Despite having no legal status in Bangladesh, they (Category C) came 'closest to the goal of self-reliance' (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xxi), displaying greater range of livelihood strategies and spatial movements among all refugee groups. Such self-created food security attained by refugees assimilating with local communities is suggestive of a *different formulation of food sovereignty* that is more appropriate to the circumstances faced by such marginal groups without land and citizenship.

As noted above, Rohingya refugees were not legally allowed to engage in economic activities in Bangladesh and those living in official camps were not formally permitted to leave and travel without permission (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xix-xx). Such restrictions left them with little choice but to break the law and pursue 'illegal' options for pursuing food security and long term livelihood opportunities (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xx). While such strategies have enabled the refugees to access food by earning incomes from the local economy, they have been necessarily exposed to a whole range of protection risks from law enforcing agencies, local powerholders and criminal elements.

Attempts by the refugees to ensure their own food security have been facilitated by their skillful use of ties of kinship, community and patronage (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xx). Rohingyas who had marriage ties with Bangladeshi families received food, shelter and physical protection from their relatives, as well as help in finding employment. Established Rohingya refugees who had arrived earlier provided similar help to new

arrivals from Myanmar, indicative of processes of 'migrant community formation' and chain migration. Furthermore, Rohingyas entered into clientelist relationships with local powerholders, elite groups, community leaders and other gatekeepers, enabling them to earn incomes and receive protection against possible deportation. Not least, the refugees made themselves indispensable in the local labour market, while also becoming unintended recruits or victims of trafficking networks. These varied roles of the Rohingyas activated powerful political and economic interests favouring their continued entry and residence in Bangladesh.¹¹

Given the lack of food rations and formal protection from the state, Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have attempted to ensure their livelihoods and food security through a number of strategies (Lewa 2011:56-57). They have accepted low wages and returns to make their presence profitable to their employers, land owners and patrons. At the same time they have become clients of local powerholders for protection. They have got themselves enrolled in the voting lists to gain formal documentation of their right to stay in Bangladesh. They have spread out from the Cox's Bazar area adjoining the Burmese border to more distant and safer parts of Bangladesh where they can assimilate into the population without being conspicuously bracketed as foreign refugees.

While such strategies have worked up to a point, these have been constrained by the systematic exclusion of the Rohingyas from the electoral roll during 2007-09 and the growth of resentment against them among local groups threatened by their competition in the form of lower wages and cheaper goods and services (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xx). Given limited stocks of farming lands, fishing areas and forests, the Rohingyas have also competed with the local population for access to these scarce natural resources (WFP & UNHCR 2012:xx).

The combination of these multiple factors unavoidably triggered social and economic conflicts and political opposition to the refugees among affected sections of the local population. Anti-Rohingya movements during 2010 have specifically targetted those economic activities and assets that have provided them with food security and protection from deportation, calling for the cancellation of their access to land and the labour market (Lewa 2011:58).

REFLECTIONS ON THE NOTION OF FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

Problematic aspects of the concepts of food sovereignty and food security emerging from analysis of the Rohingya refugees have been pointed out in context above. In this concluding section, I have briefly drawn out the implications of the analysis for the concept of food sovereignty.

This case study has dealt with a limiting context involving international refugees without land and other means to access food directly, while being legally barred from earning incomes through labour and product markets. Under such circumstances, there is little scope for food sovereignty given lack of land and citizenships rights, inclusive of the rights to work and be legally resident. The consideration that the government did not allow food rations for the bulk of the refugees who were unregistered meant that they had to access food through the market and other non-state institutional structures mediating income-earning and food provisioning. They also had no option but to flout the legal restrictions imposed upon them, for which they needed protection and patronage from local powerholders.

¹¹ 'Denied access to refugee protection and without any legal status, unregistered Rohingya [refugees] have nevertheless been tolerated in Bangladesh as the local elite have benefited from them economically and politically: employers from the cheap and hard work, landlords and house owners from their rent, and politicians as a vote bank. Mostly the local poor have resented their presence due to the competition they represent in the labour market' (Lewa 2011:56).

Comparable circumstances and constraints to accessing food apply to other social groups that lack access to land and other means of producing food, as well as the right to work openly for food provisioning without fear and restriction. For instance, these considerations could apply to minorities and insurgent groups and other internally displaced persons (IDP) inside a country that are being persecuted by the government. Viewed in these terms, the limiting context discussed in this paper may well have a much wider domain of applicability.

The conventional view of food sovereignty applies to the special case of producers with access to land and/or other means of producing food as well as holding citizenship rights allowing them to stay and work on the land without restriction. The notion of food sovereignty might acquire greater relevance if it were reconceptualized to apply to the general case, so as to subsume the instances of marginalized and landless groups that do not have the formal political rights to access food but nonetheless strive to find alternative ways and forms of resistance to meet their food needs.

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FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: A CRITICAL DIALOGUE

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Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue

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A fundamentally contested concept, food sovereignty has – as a political project and campaign, an alternative, a social movement, and an analytical framework – barged into global agrarian discourse over the last two decades. Since then, it has inspired and mobilized diverse publics: workers, scholars and public intellectuals, farmers and peasant movements, NGOs and human rights activists in the North and global South. The term has become a challenging subject for social science research, and has been interpreted and reinterpreted in a variety of ways by various groups and individuals. Indeed, it is a concept that is broadly defined as the right of peoples to democratically control or determine the shape of their food system, and to produce sufficient and healthy food in culturally appropriate and ecologically sustainable ways in and near their territory. As such it spans issues such as food politics, agroecology, land reform, biofuels, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), urban gardening, the patenting of life forms, labor migration, the feeding of volatile cities, ecological sustainability, and subsistence rights.

Sponsored by the [Program in Agrarian Studies at Yale University](#) and the [Journal of Peasant Studies](#), and co-organized by [Food First, Initiatives in Critical Agrarian Studies \(ICAS\)](#) and the [International Institute of Social Studies \(ISS\)](#) in The Hague, as well as the Amsterdam-based [Transnational Institute \(TNI\)](#), the conference “Food Sovereignty: A Critical Dialogue” was held at Yale University on September 14-15, 2013. The event brought together leading scholars and political activists who are advocates of and sympathetic to the idea of food sovereignty, as well as those who are skeptical to the concept of food sovereignty to foster a critical and productive dialogue on the issue. The purpose of the meeting was to examine what food sovereignty might mean, how it might be variously construed, and what policies (e.g. of land use, commodity policy, and food subsidies) it implies. Moreover, such a dialogue aims at exploring whether the subject of food sovereignty has an “intellectual future” in critical agrarian studies and, if so, on what terms.

The Yale conference was a huge success. It was decided by the organizers, joined by the [Land Deal Politics Initiative \(LDPI\)](#), to hold a European version of the Yale conference on 24 January 2014 at the ISS in The Hague, The Netherlands.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[Shapan Adnan](#) was educated at the Universities of Cambridge and Sussex. He has served on the teaching faculty of the National University of Singapore and the Universities of Dhaka and Chittagong, and has twice held visiting research positions at the University of Oxford. His research activities are broadly in the fields of political economy and political sociology, much of it based on ethnographic fieldwork. Shapan Adnan has published on topics including agrarian structure and capitalist development; domination and resistance among the peasantry; alienation of lands of the peasantry and indigenous peoples; causes of ethnic conflict; determinants of fertility and migration; socio-economic and environmental impacts of development interventions; and critiques of flood control and water management.



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