

From Camp to City

The Urbanization of Refugee Camps
Rethinking Cox's Bazar through an urban lens

APRIL 2025
Sciences Po Paris
Master in International Security

RESEARCH QUESTION

What becomes visible when a protracted refugee camp is analysed not only as a humanitarian space, but as a settlement undergoing urbanization?

THEORETICAL LENSES

- ROMOLA SANYAL
Urbanizing refuge · spatial agency
- ABDOUMALIQ SIMONE
People as infrastructure
- MONA FAWAZ
Informality · refugee planning

RESEARCH SUMMARY

SUMMARY

The paper examines the Rohingya settlements in Cox's Bazar through an urban lens. Rather than arguing that the camps have become conventional cities, it shows how prolonged displacement has produced hybrid spaces marked by extreme density, increasingly complex infrastructure, informal economies, refugee-led spatial adaptation and strong links with surrounding Bangladeshi communities. Drawing primarily on Romola Sanyal, AbdouMaliq Simone and Mona Fawaz, the analysis reframes refugees as active producers of space while exposing the tension between an increasingly urban reality and a governance system still structured around humanitarian temporariness.

MAIN ARGUMENTS

- 01

URBANIZATION WITHOUT FORMAL CITYHOOD

Cox's Bazar has developed many characteristics normally associated with urban settlements: very high population density, circulation networks, drainage, WASH systems, service facilities, markets and disaster infrastructure. Yet these material transformations have not been accompanied by municipal status, political incorporation or permanence. The camps are therefore better understood as spaces undergoing urbanization rather than as cities in a conventional legal or administrative sense.
- 02

REFUGEES AS PRODUCERS OF SPACE

The settlement is not produced by humanitarian agencies alone. Refugees adapt shelters and pathways, establish businesses, organize exchange and build social networks that shape everyday spatial life. Sanyal's work on refugee spaces and Simone's 'people as infrastructure' help reveal this agency: refugees are not simply recipients of aid but actors whose practices, relationships and informal systems continually remake the camp environment.
- 03

THE CAMP EXTENDS BEYOND ITS BORDERS

The Rohingya settlements are deeply connected to nearby Ukhiya and Teknaf. Refugee and Bangladeshi communities interact through labour, supply chains, markets, roads and public services, while the scale of settlement also affects land use, forests, water systems and local infrastructure. The camp should therefore be analysed as part of a wider regional system rather than as a self-contained humanitarian enclave isolated from its surroundings.
- 04

HUMANITARIAN TEMPORARINESS VS. URBAN REALITY

Protracted displacement creates a planning paradox. Humanitarian and state actors must maintain roads, drainage, water systems, sanitation, disaster protection and other infrastructure capable of supporting a large population over many years. At the same time, policy continues to frame the settlements as temporary spaces oriented toward eventual durable solutions. This mismatch limits long-term planning and produces what the paper describes as politically constrained urbanization.

CORE CONCLUSION

Camp and city are not necessarily opposite spatial forms. Cox's Bazar is best understood as a refugee space undergoing uneven and politically constrained urbanization: institutionally temporary, yet increasingly urban in its spatial, economic and infrastructural realities.

KEY REFERENCES

Sanyal (2011; 2014) · Simone (2004) · Fawaz (2017) · Filipski et al. (2021) · UNDP (2018) · World Bank (2020; 2022)