Objective: To enable children affected by humanitarian crises to learn and develop through play-based early child development and primary education.

Opportunity

In emergency and humanitarian contexts like Cox’s Bazar, children are disproportionately vulnerable to abuse, violence, and trafficking. It is vital to provide these children – and their caregivers – with psychosocial support, safe spaces, and opportunities to learn and heal through play. These activities also help address trauma, support children’s healthy development, provide a sense of routine and normalcy, and improve access to education.

To address some of these children’s most pressing needs and build resilience for children and adolescents in this fragile setting, BRAC launched Humanitarian Play Labs (HPLs) and Learning Centers in the Rohingya settlements as well as in the host communities surrounding the camps.

Background

Nearly one million displaced Rohingya are living in crowded settlements in the Cox’s Bazar district of southern Bangladesh, having fled persecution in Myanmar. Violence against the Rohingya has persisted for decades, but the mass exodus that began in August 2017 has been referred to as the fastest growing refugee crisis in the world, affecting hundreds of thousands of children and families from both the Rohingya community and the Bangladeshi host community. Children make up the majority of the displaced population, and approximately 27% percent are under the age of six. Many of these children arrived in Cox’s Bazar unaccompanied.
A new, $100 million partnership with LEGO Foundation, Sesame Workshop, International Rescue Committee, and NYU will innovate upon the HPL model, incorporating Sesame Street’s world-class multimedia learning content into BRAC’s existing network of HPLs. The visionary investment in playful learning will also bring insights from BRAC’s work in Cox’s Bazar to inform Sesame Workshop and International Rescue Committee’s work with refugee children in the Syrian response region. Together, the partnership will reach over 100,000 children by 2020.

Why BRAC?

Founded in Bangladesh as a small relief effort in 1972, BRAC is now one of the largest development organizations in the world. With over four decades of experience in Bangladesh, its deep knowledge of the context and strong relationships with local communities enabled BRAC to mobilize resources from across the country in a matter of days when the refugee crisis began. Currently, its nearly 3,000 staff in Cox’s Bazar provide a range of services including shelter, health and nutrition, water and sanitation, protection, and more in collaboration with UNICEF and other UN agencies, governments, and NGOs. As the largest education provider in the Rohingya response, BRAC’s Humanitarian Play Labs and Learning Centers build on its expertise as one of the world’s leading education providers for marginalized children, with more than 11 million graduates.

Approach

BRAC’s HPLs provide structured, play-based learning for children ages 0-6, utilizing traditional Rohingya rhymes, games, and physical play to support children’s cognitive and socioemotional development. For children ages 0-2, nearly 2,000 additional home-based HPLs bring the model directly to new mothers and enable them to share in playful activities and build responsive relationships with their children.

BRAC’s Learning Centers offer primary education to children ages 4-14. The curriculum focuses on math, science, literacy in Burmese and English, and life skills. For many Rohingya children, the Learning Centers are their first opportunity to access education, or their first chance to be in a learning environment where teachers are attentive to their needs.

Each session in a HPL or Learning Center is jointly led by women from the host community and the Rohingya community. This model trains and empowers Rohingya women and promotes person-to-person peacebuilding between the two communities, which is critical to addressing tensions that have arisen over strained resources.

HPLs and Learning Centers also promote child protection, link children to health services, and host parenting sessions. They offer comprehensive psychosocial support through group sessions and individual home visits conducted by over 230 barefoot counselors and 40 para-counselors.

“Above all else, we want everyone who comes through these doors to know that they are safe here,” says Hamida Akhter Jahan, a psychosocial counselor at BRAC. “While the situation outside may be uncertain, children can come here every day and be themselves. They can be happy and free.”