

## **The Mobilization of Noncooperative Spaces: Reflections from Rohingya Refugee Camps**

Rashedur Chowdhury  
Southampton Business School  
University of Southampton  
Highfield, Southampton,  
SO17 1BJ, UK  
Email: r.r.chowdhury@soton.ac.uk

In this essay, I challenge key assumptions in the mainstream entrepreneurship literature that individuals have the capability to change their fate through entrepreneurial activities wherever in the world they may be. I advance the concept of a coordinated and regulative cooperative market to argue that the rebalancing of power between marginalized actors such as refugees and ordinary locals, and powerful agents of what I term the ‘uncooperative sociostructure’ is essential in order to improve the wellbeing of refugees. Without a cooperative sociostructural intervention, capitalistic market mechanisms such as bottom of the pyramid (BoP) and microfinance as means to individual freedom simply imprison refugees further.

On 31 December 2017 I entered Kutupalong Rohingya refugee camp in Cox’s Bazar, the largest out of 34 such camps at the time. Rohingya refugees are not only subject to physical and psychological injuries but also face life-long statelessness as the Myanmar government denies their existence, citizenship and any fundamental rights. The Bangladesh government decided to open its border to the Rohingya refugees from August 2017, so that they could find temporary shelter in Bangladesh. During 2017, almost 750,000 Rohingya refugees entered and now more than one million Rohingya refugees reside in Bangladesh.

On first sight of the Kutupalong camp that occupies nearly 13 square kilometres of what was once forest land, it is almost impossible to conceive that this one camp is now home to over 630,000 refugees. Observing thousands of tiny and torn refugee houses from one corner of the top of the hill of this camp is simply overwhelming. With open eyes it is hard to comprehend how some of these tiny houses accommodate 10 or 15 family members, which is common. These camps and refugees are administered by a capitalistic system which I term as an “uncooperative

This article has been accepted for publication and undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as [doi: 10.1111/JOMS.12612](#)

This article is protected by copyright. All rights reserved

sociostructure” that does not support those who live under its influence to thrive. Based on my observations, I posit that this uncooperative sociostructure includes powerful actors such as United Nations (UN) agencies, multinational corporations (MNCs), powerful nongovernmental organizations (NGOs; mostly sub-contracted by UN agencies and various private or corporate foundations), government institutions and aid agencies. This uncooperative sociostructure is extended to local elites such as politicians, landlords and owners of larger enterprises. Further, I find that in Cox’s Bazar, these local elites are involved in economic transactions with refugees as they consider this their “side businesses” through which counterfeit products or illegitimate services are sold. These elites also have an interest in receiving tenders from the UN or other NGOs for the supply of refugee rations (generally comprising rice, lentils, and oil and gas for cooking) and materials for shelter, and for other purposes such as internet service, fuel, and office supplies. These tender businesses become significant transactions where all parties including local elites and a section of UN and NGO officials share large numbers of commissions. However, the ordinary locals I talked with do not see these transactions as transparent and beneficial to the community, as these transactions only boost the incomes of powerful actors. Hence, during my second and third visits in late 2018 and early 2019, I sensed significantly increased resentment among the locals and refugees against authorities.

Meanwhile, I find it intriguing that powerful actors of uncooperative sociostructure continue to search for ways to cut refugee maintenance costs. Cost reduction becomes a priority for two main reasons. First, this increases possibilities for boosting commission-sharing from tender businesses. Second, this allows for the increase of administrative costs – processes through which profit-sharing is legitimized – such as renting office space and hiring foreign consultants. For example, the cost of hiring foreign consultants is very high. A top NGO official notes that more than 1,000 foreign consultants work in Rohingya refugee camps and raises concerns about the necessity of hiring such an extraordinary number of consultants since money could be better spent on infrastructure and refugee development. Besides, foreign consultants lack understanding of local issues. Despite that, this particular official suggests that hiring of such consultants is becoming a fashionable trend because powerful (inter)national agencies aggressively use this scheme to ensure they win funding bids.

Ironically, the hiring of experts and increasing number of multi-agency employees puts pressure on luxury hotels and ordinary accommodation in Cox’s Bazar. This movement of professional workers drives up the prices of groceries, transportation and house rent for locals. A

rickshaw puller I talked with claims that groceries are so expensive he has started thinking of leaving Cox's Bazar, as he can no longer afford to feed his family properly.

Unwarranted rises of administrative cost and commission-sharing practices across the network of uncooperative sociostructure have serious negative implications for refugees. For example, my conversations with refugees revealed that both the scale and quality of provisions has been deteriorating compared to what they received in the early days. One local elite member admits that not all trucks that supply rations are unloaded in camps. Some trucks leave camps without unloading rations depending on what types of deals local elites have struck with the officials involved. This person argues that the system allows everyone to benefit. It is "fair" for all.

Since prime actors of uncooperative sociostructure are busy chasing funding and finding ways to cut corners, they become ignorant about issues and priorities that need urgent attention. This means that increasing children's nourishment and women's empowerment are not high on their agenda. This negligence is, of course, not unnoticed by camp inhabitants. For example, in one of the Rohingya camps, I met a refugee whose entire family was able to move to Canada in 1992 (small numbers of displaced Rohingya refugees had started to enter Cox's Bazaar since the early 1990s). S/he is the only family member – back then aged 12 – left behind in camp and unable to leave ever since because of inadequate paperwork. S/he has been trapped and alone in the camp for over 25 years now and suffers intermittent physical and psychological abuse which contributed to deeper trauma. During our almost three and a half hours' intense and deeply emotional conversation s/he points out how "screwed up" and insensitive camp authorities are; but nobody dares to speak out against them. S/he mentions the ever-increasing arms and drugs problems in the camps alongside sex trafficking and concludes that this very notion that such problems are of refugees' own making is not just a falsehood – it is also a mechanism to deprive refugees of their fundamental rights such as education, meaningful work, or prospects to live a dignified life.

Despite their dire situation, these refugees find ways to (re)build their lives in whatever way they can. I find that some refugees extended their temporary shelter to create tea stalls or tiny grocery shops. Some are building wooden and bamboo items for household purposes and plant limited crops of vegetables. More surprisingly, I observe camp bazars with a variety of essential products and services on sale. These bazars could not have been created or run unless ordinary locals provided the materials to build some of these stores, accessories for services, and products for sale. Ordinary locals have incentives to help refugees because some of these local goods are

smuggled through them into camps. Again, refugees often bribe these ordinary locals to obtain counterfeit products without knowing the harmful effect of such products and continue selling them in their camp stores. Although these bazars do not generate much economic return, given the vulnerability of refugees, it is inspiring to see such activities. Thus, a significant level of cooperation between ordinary locals and refugees is visible.

Yet, to date, the full development and manifestation of (in)formal cooperation between ordinary locals and refugees is often disrupted by local authorities. For example, in Rohingya refugee camps, the Bangladesh government recently downgraded the mobile phone service from 4G/3G to 2G to restrict refugees' exchange of information with outsiders, including their relatives, and any other formal exchange. Such restrictions are imposed with the argument that refugees participate in criminal activities. This, however, helps local elites to monopolize the market as ordinary/poor locals and refugees have restricted prospects for communication and trade.

This helplessness of ordinary locals and refugees influences me to argue for the establishment of alternative cooperative markets as an essentiality in refugee camps – a form of market which during my visits to the refugee camps I often observe to (partially) emerge and just as quickly vanish in an *ad hoc* and informal manner. By 'alternative cooperative market', I mean a market where both locals such as ordinary traders and shopkeepers and refugees freely trade or exchange (non)monetary (in)tangible products and services without any restrictions imposed by authorities. To achieve this, agents of the uncooperative sociostructure need to better coordinate to come up with transparent regulations for legitimizing such markets. In such a process, marginalized actors such as refugees and ordinary locals can emerge as an alternative authority. From this standpoint, achieving a balance of power in the cooperative market is vital to reduce illegal and illegitimate practices; enforced regulations and explicit coordination mechanisms between powerful and marginalized actors can create more checks and balances and accountability than are currently in place in Rohingya refugee camps.

### **Development of Cooperative Markets to Unlock Noncooperative Space**

The idea of a regulated and coordinated cooperative market is to provide refugees with freedom to pursue entrepreneurial activities that matter to them and that they can manage. Therefore, I reject the mainstream idea that NGOs and MNCs can *rescue* refugees through entrepreneurial possibilities such as microfinance and BoP wherever and in whatever way they choose. One of the most harmful ideological effects of both BoP and microfinance in such a refugee marketplace is

that those neoliberal mechanisms promote individual agency as a solution, as opposed to regulatory and formal intervention of the uncooperative sociostructure as a responsible entity for resolving political and economic exploitations. My argument is that no matter how hard refugees try to improve their situation, their reality is that they do not encounter those aspects typically considered by entrepreneurship literature as success factors. The serendipity, opportunity and resources that entrepreneurship scholars artificially create and impose in various forms and multiple contexts are simply absent. In the camps, refugees are unable to develop their capabilities or ensure they can generate minimum existential earnings through individual effort and creativity, even if they have the abilities. Instead, I argue that refugees live in *noncooperative space* heavily manipulated and controlled by an *uncooperative sociostructure* where powerful actors knowingly and deliberately seek to thwart cooperation between local actors, do not cooperate with refugees or develop supportive institutional frameworks (e.g., regulative and transparent governance principles) for refugees. Thus, elite interests are perpetuated, and refugees are forced to survive at the mercy of those who control them. By ‘noncooperative space’, I mean a space which is highly restrictive, disadvantageous, or even harmful because of institutional arrangements; where people have virtually no capacity to use their very real potential and skills that are perceived relevant in existing entrepreneurship theory.

The above means that refugee camps must not be left to elite NGOs and MNCs – whose roles are extraordinarily problematic – to sell microcredit or consumer products in order to profit from vulnerable refugees. Otherwise, we risk perpetuating the interests of those powerful actors while neglecting urgent refugee issues. To break free from this vicious trap and, more importantly, to advance entrepreneurship theory by shifting outdated ideals to more realistic and timelier conceptualization of the *noncooperative paradigm*, I propose a cooperative market as an escape route towards freedom and actual entrepreneurial possibilities.

For this, I argue that powerful agents of uncooperative sociostructure should be held responsible for reconfiguring structural issues transparently in and around refugee camps so that noncooperative spaces are unlocked. By ‘unlocking’ I mean allowing the nurturing of human potentials and scaling-up those potentials by easing access to and flow of legitimate products and services in camps, thereby developing a cooperative market that meets refugees’ true needs.

### **Nurturing of human possibilities**

Nurturing of refugee potential is possible because even refugees are eager to actualize their necessities and desires. Refugees are initially interested in meeting their basic needs. For instance, the hand-to-mouth rations that they receive from camp authorities fulfil their basic necessity for nutrition. But meeting this necessity triggers basic desires. For example, it is difficult for anyone to live on rice and lentils month after month, refugee or not. In such a situation, eating fish or any meat, at least once a month, becomes a most desirable expectation. Thus, to fulfil their most basic desire to eat better refugees are encouraged to create some small economic activities to generate income.

The propensity of desire is extended over time across a different spectrum of activities. For example, I talked with one of the informal store owners who told me that they had built and developed the store since they arrived in the camp. Initially, it only stocked a few items. Later, they started to stockpile more goods by selling ration goods that they received from the camp authority to the locals. They worry that since the store is built with flimsy materials such as bamboo and grasses, it is not durable, particularly during the rainy season, but they do not want to stop developing it because it gives the family a sense of purpose and keeps them occupied. Also, this store provides a little extra income that they use to purchase groceries. Furthermore, refugees might want to wear new attire during their festive season such as Eid. Hence, refugees want to earn some extra income to buy new clothes at least once every year during the festival. While UN agencies allow a small amount of labor activities so that refugees generate some cash, such activities are extremely limited and competitive. For this reason, a wider cooperative market is necessary so that refugees have access to a greater range of possibilities.

### **Legitimizing the scaling-up**

While scaling-up is essential to ease the rigidity of camp structure and the way the refugees live in these camps, it can also ensure legitimate distribution of products and services, increase female empowerment, and reduce various crimes. Strictly speaking, no bazars can take place in refugee camps. Therefore, authorities tend to turn a blind eye to them. However, local elites see these as an opportunity to sell counterfeit products. During my visits, I came across a variety of products (e.g., bottles of water and fizzy drink, ice cream, groceries) and medicines which I have never seen in mainland markets. These hardly ever have any product information or expiry dates. Refugees purchase such products because they are accessible and cheap; however, these goods, particularly medical products, have potential to cause longer term and severe health issues. One of the vendors

— in whose store I spent a few hours observing refugees' purchasing-patterns— mentions that all these medicines are sold in refugee camps because these never received regulatory approval from the Bangladeshi pharmaceutical authority. Obviously, refugees are unaware of such vital information. If the actors of an uncooperative sociostructure were to legitimize a coordinated and regulated cooperative market, then it would be easier to impose much needed regulations in camp areas. A legal regulatory framework to maintain minimum product standards could not then be overlooked by the authorities. Such a framework can only be effective, though, when the market is formally developed, and actors cooperate.

Currently, refugees participate in small-scale entrepreneurial activities through the help of locals. For instance, ordinary locals purchase refugees' rations in exchange for cash or products. To scale-up, it is important to facilitate local and national coordination, which is necessary for the development of an effective cooperative market. For example, Bangladesh has a successful garments industry. Some of the skills and capabilities of those working in the garments industry are transferable to Rohingya refugee camps. With the help of garments associations, UN bodies could divert certain low-skilled garments work to the refugee camps. In addition, the garments industry generates a significant volume of cutting waste, locally known as *jhut*, which requires sorting for recycling and reuse. Such laborious work is easier to transfer to the camps as it does not require machines or a factory set-up. There are also other forms of work such as stitching of certain clothes or products (e.g., soccer balls), that are done manually or require less sophisticated machinery. If regulations were enforced, all these activities would reduce the level of subcontracting (as it is possible to establish more formal channels) which has long been of concern in the Bangladeshi garments industry.

By allowing the development of the above-mentioned activities in refugee camps, MNCs would indirectly contribute to refugee wellbeing. Since the Bangladeshi garments industry relies on foreign orders, it is possible that some of those orders are directly linked with how refugees participate in such work. This can be well served by MNCs so that scaling-up reaches a critical point where small- to medium-range machinery is set up in refugee camps. Nevertheless, such a set-up must include local participation. It is important to secure the approval of ordinary locals – otherwise, they would feel bypassed and deprived. Thus, inclusion of locals in the expansion of low-skilled work is critical.

Beyond the garments industry, entrepreneurial activities can take place through the manufacturing of artisan products for which Bangladesh has a worldwide reputation. Such work is

normally done on home premises and is, therefore, easier to assign to female refugees who come from a conservative background, ultimately adding value towards their individual development. Moreover, often women are used for drug dealing as they wear a veil. Enforcement agency members are less suspicious of them, so these women easily transfer drugs from one camp to another or outside the camps. Empowerment of female refugees is an antidote against women being used for trafficking, smuggling and sex-work.

I witnessed entrepreneurialism on the part of many refugees, but nonetheless, I argue that actualization of individual-level entrepreneurial activities on a larger scale is only possible when a number of refugees become a well-trained workforce. This would naturally trigger many more entrepreneurial activities. To achieve this, it is necessary to establish vocational training programs which go beyond primary education in camps, so that refugees are encouraged to undertake training to become electricians, plumbers, barbers, artisans, and smiths, and in other relevant areas. Through training, an internal market flourishes quickly, and refugee contributions would connect more easily with the local community and wider economy. This can ultimately reduce the level of crime as one of the refugees complained that “if children and adults alike have no education and work for perpetuity” they are easier targets for drugs and trafficking businesses; exploitation (e.g., sex-work, abduction, rape cases) particularly affects refugee women and children as they are the easiest target of all.

### **Conclusion**

My underlying argument is that individuals have better or worse possibilities of actualizing their basic needs and desires depending on the fluidity of the existing market structure. Since mainstream capitalist markets are designed for exploitation where brutality prevails over time, without *cooperative sociostructural* intervention, it is impossible to mobilize a noncooperative space empathetically and fairly for entrepreneurial activities. In other words, entrepreneurship theory needs a dramatic shift in its core focus: rather than believing in the mythical power of individual agency it must focus on changes to uncooperative sociostructures in order to mobilize noncooperative space. Unless such a dangerous ideological belief system is overcome, we cannot move forward in a world where increasing numbers of people continue to experience or remain locked-into noncooperative spaces. While any host country would navigate the geopolitical landscape to send refugees back to their home countries, powerful agents of uncooperative sociostructure should not renege on their moral duties to reduce the pain and suffering of



extremely vulnerable people. This is achievable as soon as regulated and coordinated cooperative market ideals are materialized. This is necessary to ensure that refugee camps do not remain dumping grounds for unwanted products and services in particular and as a mere capitalistic market for exploitation more generally. What is missing is a deep thinking, a genuine attitude of caring, and courage to overcome close-mindedness and a destructive self-satisfaction-seeking attitude that is inherent in the uncooperative sociostructure which, by its very nature, seeks to dominate geopolitics and imperialism for its own benefit while neglecting its expected role in working to increase the welfare of vulnerable populations. From this perspective, noncooperative spaces are widely spread across the globe. The Rust Belt in the USA, once famous for steel production and heavy industry, is now experiencing higher inequality and unemployment rates. Sunk and council housing estates in the UK are seeing increasing social problems. Ghettos in Europe are home to minorities because of socio-economic discrimination; and, in townships in South Africa, disadvantaged black populations live in conditions of extreme poverty and racial inequality. These are only a few examples of increasingly noncooperative spaces of systemic capitalistic oppression that are sustained by the insensitivity of agents of uncooperative sociostructure. This needs urgent attention of the kind that the individualism of mainstream entrepreneurship cannot deliver.

**Caption: Partial view of a Rohingya refugee camp**



**Caption: A Rohingya refugee bazar**



### **Acknowledgements**

I am indebted to the editors, Rick Delbridge, Daniel Muzio, and Trish Reay for presenting my in-depth research experience and empirical observations without any constraints or reservations. More specifically, I sincerely thank Rick Delbridge for his constructive suggestions to substantiate my arguments and to restructure the essay in a way that captures the reality at ground level. I thank Farooq Ahmad and Benjamin Siedler for their careful reviews of my work. I also thank Gregory Hood, Andrew Jarvis, Aniket Kumar, Wim van Lent, Stefano Miraglia and Stratos Ramoglou, for their guidance in improving this essay. Although I very much want to thank several close friends and informants from Bangladesh who assisted my fieldwork, I refrain from doing so for their safety and security.