

VOICES OF DISPLACED ROHINGYA CHILDREN IN BANGLADESH

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UNVEILING WORLDS: CENTERING CHILD VOICES IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS CASE STUDY SERIES

Young children from birth to 8 years old have a lot to contribute to how humanitarian programs are designed and the policies guiding them. Yet these programs and policies are often top-down and fail to consider children's perspectives, despite commitments stated in the humanitarian Grand Bargain to prioritize the participation of affected communities (Boyden 1994; Wessells 2021; IASC 2023). At the same time, humanitarian aid across all sectors is being slashed, adding challenges to the already limited 2-3% of annual humanitarian funding for young children's programs (Moving Minds Alliance 2020; United Nations 2025). Evidence has been emerging about the participation of affected people to inform humanitarian practices and policies, but this has not yet included young children, and it is not at the level close to achieving the Grand Bargain commitments (IASC 2023). The humanitarian community needs more evidence to move from rhetoric to reality.



Child
Voices
Series

To help address this gap and move the humanitarian space forward, the Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution partnered with researchers and non-profit organizations to understand “How can participatory research approaches be used to actively engage and elevate children's voices in designing early childhood programs and policies in humanitarian contexts? How does centering young children's voices in designing programs and policies improve humanitarian response?” To answer these questions, we examined three child participatory arts-based research approaches: drawing, photography, and storytelling through play accompanied by conversations with children. These case studies span three humanitarian situations: the refugee crisis in Bangladesh, internal displacement due to earthquakes in Türkiye, and migration in Colombia. Through these case studies, we aim to help humanitarian

practitioners and policymakers think differently about young children's abilities, integrate their voices into future humanitarian program designs and policies, and contribute to fulfilling one of the many Grand Bargain commitments.

This first case study uses drawing and child-led conversations to illuminate young Rohingya children's lived realities to inform humanitarian programs and policies.¹ This qualitative study offers context-specific insights from children to inform policies and practices for governmental bodies, U.N. agencies and implementing NGOs. This approach is replicable, low-cost, and adaptable to any protracted emergency context. Children's views, as highlighted in this research, are already changing how BRAC, a Global South-led international development agency, implements its programs. Additionally, to have a broader impact, BRAC² has initiated discussions for program and policy modification based on this research with the Early Childhood Development (ECD) in emergencies coordination group³ and the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner within the Bangladesh Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief.

1 The research presented here is drawn from larger research called "My Play Life: A Qualitative Study of Children's Play in Bangladesh," an initiative by the BRAC Institute of Educational Development (BRAC IED) and the University of Cambridge and funded by the Lego Foundation. This research is not published.

2 BRAC Institute for Educational Development (IED) is the research and technical arm of BRAC and has been leading these discussions with various stakeholders.

3 The ECD in emergencies coordination group in the Rohingya camp includes BRAC and its affiliates such as BRAC-IED, Plan International, International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, and many local Bangladeshi groups.

WHY ARE CHILDREN'S VOICES IMPORTANT IN HUMANITARIAN CONTEXTS?

Leveraging children's voices to inform practices and policies that improve their lives is not a new concept. Children, particularly adolescents, have been involved in activities to inform decisions about their lives in humanitarian and non-humanitarian contexts before (Checkoway and Gutiérrez 2006; Blakeslee and Walker 2018; Apollo and Mbah 2022; Plush et al. 2018). Children's abilities to express themselves—even if not using direct verbal language—and sharing their stories with others is not only possible, but fundamental, particularly in humanitarian settings. The 1989 U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms children's right to be heard in matters affecting them (UN General Assembly 1989), a principle that has gained recognition as essential in crisis response and recovery. Research has found that encouraging children to articulate their experiences contributes to their psychological healing and increases their sense of agency after trauma (Hart et al. 2004; Denov and Shevell 2019). Allowing children to participate in humanitarian work by soliciting their lived perspective also makes humanitarian intervention more relevant to children's needs (Larkins et al. 2014). While it is often not feasible to engage children in the immediate aftermath of a disaster or crisis when speed and efficiency are essential, given the protracted nature of crises, there are often opportunities to bring in children's perspectives once acute response has passed.

Moreover, storytelling and creative expression provide avenues for children to communicate beyond traditional linguistic or cultural barriers, especially when mainstream forms of participation are inaccessible (Mitchell et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2018). In contexts of displacement or conflict, these practices not only validate children's experiences but also challenge deficit-based narratives that portray them solely as passive victims, instead recognizing their insights, resilience, and potential to shape their own futures (Erdemir 2022; Sorensen 2022; Tomsic and Zbaracki 2020).

Yet in most humanitarian contexts (and non-humanitarian contexts), children's voices, especially those of young children, are not typically considered in programming, policy, or funding decisions (Alier 2024; Wessells 2021). While young children, who are still developing their oral and written communication skills, may not be able to express themselves in the same way as older children and adults, there is evidence of their expressive abilities through free and imaginative play, drama, art, dance, photography, and more (Blaisdell et al. 2018; Allmark et al. 2017; Wall and Robinson 2022).

The gap in young children’s voice in programming, policy, and funding decisions is a critical issue that needs to be addressed. A young child has a different perspective on the world from adults due to various factors, including their smaller physical size, stage of development, the culture of the environment in which they live, and more. These differences affect the types and intensities of risk they face in humanitarian emergencies. Further, children see the world differently from adults. Research in Kenya revealed that children consistently did not like screaming and sounds of their parents fighting—which could have included physical and psychological violence—while their parents never identified these things as issues (Kostelny et al. 2013). While parents and caregivers can share perspectives on behalf of the child, they cannot see the world from a child’s eyes. They often bring their own lenses and biases.

While donors and humanitarian program implementers, mainly at the global level, emphasize the importance of valuing lived experiences and perspectives, this has not yet translated into concrete actions that consider children’s voices in humanitarian programming or policies (Hirono and Nurdin 2024; Rogoff et al. 2018). Where such listening and elevation have occurred, especially in global forums, it has often been extractive and tokenistic, with significant adult molding and shaping. Young children’s authentic voices and narratives are essential to bring about changes in humanitarian services that focus on their learning and development, protection, and health. They also matter when humanitarian aid agencies conduct needs assessments, request funds, and consider policies that affect entire camps or displaced communities.

BACKGROUND: THE GLOBAL EVIDENCE BASE FOR DRAWING AS VOICE

Using art to understand children's experiences, particularly in contexts of displacement, is a well-established global practice. Drawing serves as a universal language, allowing children to communicate complex emotions and experiences that defy words (Einarsdottir 2007). It provides a direct, unfiltered window into their worldview, bypassing the potential for adult interpretation or bias that can color verbal interviews (Gauntlett 2007). Scholars have documented how drawing provides a safe outlet for expressing feelings that are too overwhelming to verbalize, allowing for a

process of externalization and mastery over traumatic memories (Malchiodi 2021). This form of expression is not merely therapeutic; it is a vital source of knowledge. Through their creations, children can challenge deficit-based narratives that cast them as passive victims, instead asserting their identity, resilience, and unique understanding of their world (Leavy 2020).



While the convergence of this global evidence with the organic, pre-existing artistic practices within the Rohingya community provided a powerful rationale for adopting an art-based methodology, this case study moves a step further than simply confirming art's therapeutic value by positioning child-led art as a direct source of actionable data for informing and modifying humanitarian program design and policy. The community's innate practice of using art to create meaning makes this approach culturally resonant rather than an external imposition, a fact vividly captured in Humanitarian Play Labs where children joyfully claim ownership by drawing on big canvases like the walls and doors.

CONTEXT: THE ROHINGYA CRISIS



Since 2017, Bangladesh has hosted one of the world's most enduring displacement crises, with over a million Rohingya taking shelter in 33 densely packed camps across Cox's Bazar, having fled persecution in Myanmar (Joint Response Plan 2025). Life in the camps is defined by ongoing hardship. Families reside in cramped bamboo and tarpaulin shelters, connected by rudimentary lanes that often border open, garbage-clogged drains. This environment poses daily health and safety risks, while the uncertainty of their future compounds psychosocial stress.

The humanitarian response has been a massive undertaking coordinated by the government of Bangladesh. Key government bodies include the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner and the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, which oversees the national strategy and administration of the crisis. The Inter-Sector Coordination Group facilitates the coordination for the operational response. Key stakeholders include different U.N. agencies, international, national, and local humanitarian actors. Despite these concerted efforts under the Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis, the capacity to ensure the holistic well-being of every child remains severely stretched (Joint Response Plan 2025).

RESEARCH DESCRIPTION: ACCESSING CHILDREN'S VOICES THROUGH ART

This case study, led by BRAC IED and the University of Cambridge, used the “Drawing as Dialogue” method which is rooted in trust and authentic engagement with the community. It was facilitated by a pair of data collectors from Cox’s Bazar, who were fluent in the Rohingya language and had prior experience working with the Rohingya community. These data collectors, who had been trained as para-counselors with basic psychosocial knowledge, spent six months building the profound level of rapport and trust necessary for children to feel safe enough to share their authentic selves. During this time, the data collectors spent their office hours silently observing each child on a rotation basis while taking detailed notes. The art sessions were done afterwards.



The “Drawing as Dialogue” method was intentionally simple, child-centric, and non-intrusive. Sample children were selected through a step-by-step process. Within the Rohingya camps, after the initial survey for basic information, 30 children were shortlisted. Then through a careful review process, eight children were finally selected based on the following purposive sampling criteria: 1) the child’s willingness to participate and interact with data collectors, 2) the interest and consent of parents and families to participate, 3) the ensured availability of the child and their family throughout the data collection period, 4) achieving an equal mix of age and gender, and 5) ensuring representation across the larger project’s age cohorts (0-2, 3-5, and 6-7 years). The final sample consisted of four girls and four boys, with two children from the 0-2 cohort, three from the 3-5 cohort, and three from the 6-7 cohort. The method’s power lies in the integration of two distinct but interconnected data streams: the visual data of the drawing itself and the verbal data of the child’s narrative. The drawing serves as the child’s spontaneous, symbolic representation of their world, revealing what they choose to prioritize without the filter of direct questioning. The narrative unlocks the drawing, transforming it from a static image into a dynamic story. Neither component is complete without the other; together, they create a rich, holistic dataset that captures a nuanced understanding of the child’s perspective that is not over-interpreted by adults.

The step-by-step process was as follows:

- 1. Establishing a safe space:** After building a rapport, the data collectors engaged with children in the comfort and security of their own homes. This familiar environment, free from the judgment of outside observers, provided a sense of psychological security that enabled children to make their own decisions about what to draw and what to share.
- 2. An open invitation to create:** The participating children were given paper and crayons and the freedom to draw whatever they wished. The activity was initiated with gentle, open-ended prompts designed to be positive and familiar, avoiding any direct or potentially re-traumatizing questions.
- 3. Child-led narrative:** The drawing itself became the starting point for a conversation guided entirely by the child. The data collector would ask gentle prompts,⁴ allowing the child to lead the storytelling.
- 4. Ethical and authentic documentation:** The children's verbatim narratives were carefully recorded, transcribed, translated and back translated, preserving the authenticity of their voices. The drawing and accompanying text were treated as a single, unified piece of data. Rigorous ethical protocols were followed, including obtaining informed consent from parents and assent from the children, and ensuring their identities were protected.

This qualitative study used a purposive sample of eight children. Its findings are illustrative and not statistically generalizable. However, the findings are critical. They challenge adult-centric assumptions and highlight nuanced issues, such as the "dual home" identity, that large-scale surveys often miss.

To mitigate the small sample size and guard against adult over-interpretation, the study emphasized rigor. This rigor relied on a three-point data triangulation. The process included: (1) the drawings, (2) the child's verbatim narrative (transcribed and back-translated), and (3) ethnographic observations by the data collectors. Finally, all interpretations were validated through peer debriefing. The full BRAC IED and University of Cambridge project team reviewed the findings to ensure they remained aligned with the children's own accounts.

⁴ Example gentle prompts included: "Can you tell me about your drawing?", "What is this part here?", "Who is this?", "What is happening in this picture?", and "Tell me more about this." The prompts were designed to be open-ended invitations for the child to lead the narrative, rather than closed-ended questions.

RESULTS: ROHINGYA CHILDREN'S VOICES

Far more than simple pictures, the drawings and the children's own explanations as seen below revealed a rich tapestry of interconnected themes. While the drawings presented here are chosen as powerful, illustrative examples, the themes they represent emerged as illustrative examples of the complex insights shared by children in this cohort. These visual and verbal narratives provide a rare and unfiltered map into how children perceive their physical world, navigate their social relationships, and process their inner emotional lives.

To maintain clarity and focus, each theme is illustrated with two powerful, representative drawings and their accompanying narratives.

Theme 1: Agency and the reimagination of space



The drawings consistently reveal children as active agents who are not defined by their environment but are constantly reshaping it through their imagination and social interactions.

FIGURE 1

Drawing by a six-year-old girl depicting a “camp house” and a “Myanmar house.”



“My favorite games are Chon Hodda (a traditional game), Hari Patil (pretend cooking). I play here in front of the kitchen. This is a pan, dish, glass, mug, spoon, and sack. These are sacks; I play sit on them for playing. I cook rice in this pot. This is a swing. There are betel nut trees, carambola trees, and houses around us. This is a carambola hanging on the tree. **These are houses. One is a camp house, and another one is a Myanmar house. I play with my friends.** Here are Sathi, Ismat Ara, and Ruma! I like playing with them. They are my cousins. **We also have a drain here. There is soil and water in the drain** (She draws garbage in brown and water in purple in the drain.)”

A DUAL SENSE OF HOME

This drawing offers a profound insight into the psychological navigation of dual identity. The child does not place the idea of her “Myanmar house” (the home her family lived in while in Myanmar, which she has heard countless stories of from the elders) in the past; she draws it side-by-side with her “camp house,” indicating a co-existing reality. The play she describes with her friends takes place in this blended space. This suggests that for children, play is not just an activity but a crucial psychological tool for integrating their past with their present and making sense of a fractured identity. For policymakers, this challenges the notion of a singular “refugee identity” and highlights the need for psychosocial support programs that acknowledge and create space for this complex, layered senses of belonging.

FIGURE 2

Drawing by a six-year-old boy of his friends and imaginative play.



“My favorite game is “egg game.” I play with bottles in the narrow lane of our house. Here is the lane. These are my friends. We are playing an “egg game” with the bottles. Two of my friends are standing to catch the bottle. I throw the bottle and it hits them, now they are out. This is a house, a drain, and a tree. A Shona bird (Bulbul bird in Bengali) is sitting on the acacia tree. Another one is standing on the ground. This is a ball and a shop. Here is the shop owner. The shop has some snacks. This is a watermelon, spinning top, jackfruits, and a rose plant. Here is the sun, clouds, and an airplane.”

THE “EGG GAME” AND A WORLD OF IMAGINATION

This drawing is a powerful depiction of environmental appropriation. The child takes the constrained reality of a “narrow lane” and discarded “bottles” and transforms them into a vibrant arena for a socially complex game. His narrative and the drawing’s density—filled with friends, nature, commerce (a shop), and symbols of the outside world (an airplane)—illustrate a rich inner life that transcends the physical limitations of the camp. This is not mere escapism; it is an act of world-building. In a humanitarian context where children’s lives are highly regulated and circumscribed, this form of play is a critical act of agency, allowing them to exert control and create normalcy in a chaotic environment.

Theme 2: Children as experts of their lived environment



The drawings serve as detailed, child-centric maps of their surroundings, highlighting a keen awareness of both the resources and the risks that define their daily lives, as seen in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3

Images of children adapting to their environment and playing in the camp environment.



SOURCE: Apurba Ratan Roy, BRAC IED

FIGURE 4

Drawing by a six-year-old boy depicting play alongside environmental hazards.



"My favorite play is playing with a ball. I play it with my friends. Here they are: Armaan, Md. Anas. Now, this is Salman, Riaz, and Shahid. These are all the balls. These are shoes. This is the road, and here is the field. **Beside our road, there is drainage and a garbage bin. There are many polythene bags, and it's full of garbage inside.** There are also houses beside the road. Here is the house. This is a comb and a floor mat. **This square one is the washroom, and inside there are spiderwebs.** This one is a shop, and these are snacks. This is a tree, and these are birds. Beside the drain, there is sand—all around, there's sand."

A LANDSCAPE OF HAZARDS AND PLAY

This drawing presents the child as an environmental auditor. He does not separate his play from its context; instead, he provides a detailed, factual report on the sanitation hazards he navigates daily. His clinical description of the “garbage-filled” drain and “spiderwebs” in the washroom is a form of testimony for camp managers. It demonstrates that the innate drive for play persists even amidst significant risks, making a powerful case for the urgent need for safe, dedicated play areas.

FIGURE 5

Drawing by a four-year-old girl mapping her world from her doorstep.



“These are bowls. This bowl is for rice, and this one is for curry. Here... two pieces of meat. I have cooked rice and lentil soup here. **My favorite play is Chon-hodda (kitchen set). I play beside our door. This is the door and the sack (door mat). Next to my play area, there is a road, chickens, and soil.** Here in this house... this is a mosquito net. There are jars in the shop. This is bun, bread, and a lollipop. These are plants... a mango tree. **I play with Rozina, Lalani, and Seuani. They are my friends.** This one is Rozina, and this is Lalani... these are her hair. This is Seuani. Now I will draw a fish. This is a Pangasius fish.”

THE WORLD BESIDE THE DOOR

This child’s drawing maps her sphere of safety, anchored to the threshold of her home. The “door” is a symbolic boundary between the private, controlled world and the public, unpredictable one. Her play, which recreates the domestic routine of cooking, is an act of establishing normalcy and predictability. This provides a micro-level insight into a child’s perception of security, suggesting that interventions, particularly for the youngest children, may be most effective when they are home-based or replicate this sense of secure proximity.

Theme 3: Processing and mastering the adult world



Many drawings depicted scenes of commerce and care, showing how children use role-play not just to mimic, but to process, understand, and gain a sense of control over the complex systems around them.

FIGURE 6

Drawing by a four year-old boy of a “medicine shop.”



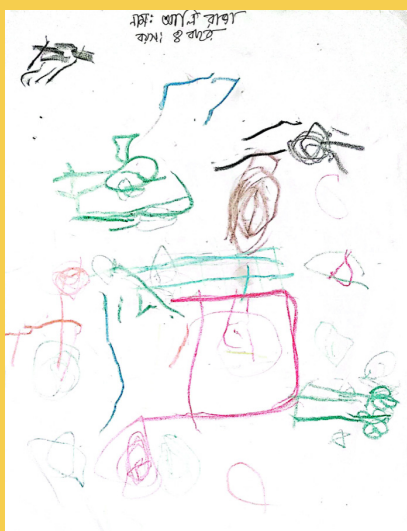
“I play here in the yard. Now I will draw my house... here it is. **I play Dabai (medicine shop) here; it is my favorite game. I sell medicine here.** This is the door of my shop. **I have so many things here... injections, saline, and medicine.** Beside my shop, there are trees. This is the boundary. I play Dabai with my elder brother, Anwar, and Babushha. Here they are. I like playing most with Anwar brother.”

THE MEDICINE SHOP

This is a powerful example of cognitive mastery through play. The child is not just imitating a doctor; he is deconstructing a complex and potentially frightening system (healthcare, illness) and re-enacting it in a way that grants him agency. In a humanitarian setting where illness is a constant threat and healthcare is a critical service, this form of play is a vital coping mechanism. For program designers, this shows that children need tools not just to escape their reality, but to process and understand it.

FIGURE 7

Drawing by a four-year-old boy of a “sweets shop.”



“I play beside the road, here in front of our house. I like playing Dokan-Dokan (shopkeeper). Here is a shop—red in color. It is a sweets shop. Here... these are red sweets, yellow sweets, and blue sweets. This is the shop's floor. There are also trees beside my shop. This is the road and some birds. That is a betel nut tree.

There are dogs in the middle of the road. Here, a bird is standing, and this dog is sitting beside the road. This is the dog's hair. **This is my grandfather, standing with his stick beside the shop. This is a cockroach. There are cockroaches in the shop. They want to eat the sweets and the soil.**

THE SWEETS SHOP AND ITS UNINVITED GUESTS

This drawing illustrates the intersection of social structures and environmental reality. The child's world includes commerce (the shop), family hierarchy (grandfather with a stick, a symbol of authority), and the unavoidable reality of pests. His play as a "shopkeeper" is a way of learning the social and economic rules of his community. His unfiltered observation is a powerful, child's perspective of how daily life is a constant negotiation between pleasure and hazard. An adult might simply see a pest; the child sees the pest in direct relation to the pleasure item (the sweets). By noting the cockroach wants both "sweets and soil," he demonstrates that in his lived reality, the desirable (sweets) and the hazardous (soil, pests) are not separate. They are intertwined in the same space, forcing a constant, casual navigation between the two.

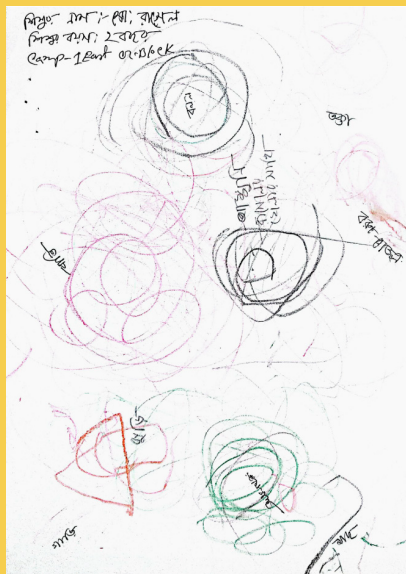
Theme 4: The emergence of symbolic communication



Even the drawings of the youngest children, which might appear as simple scribbles, were imbued with rich meaning, revealing the foundational elements of their world and the dawn of symbolic thought.

FIGURE 8

Drawing by a two-year-old girl connecting scribbles to her mother and daily life.



"This is bottle...Light. This is a bowl...scribbles...
Mango tree...scribbles...fish...My Ammuni
(mother)...scribbles...Ball."

A MOTHER, A FISH, AND A MANGO TREE

This drawing maps the child's core attachments and needs. Stripped of all but the most essential elements, her narrative translates abstract marks into the foundational pillars of her world: nourishment (bottle, fish), nature (Mango tree), play (Ball), and, most critically, her primary attachment figure ("My Ammuni" (my mother)). This early form of art as an expression is a powerful reminder for any humanitarian program that for the youngest children, interventions must be built around strengthening these fundamental bonds.

FIGURE 9

Drawing by a two year-old girl representing her world through symbol.



"My favorite play is playing with Chonhodka (kitchen set). I play in the veranda. Look! here is my bag...toys... fairy! Drawing fairy! Ducks...these are early plates. Scribbles...Here is soap... horse carriage...spoon...biscuits. This is Bubu (elder sister)."

A WORLD OF FAIRIES AND BISCUITS

This piece demonstrates the emergence of symbolic representation. To an adult, it's a collection of marks; to the child, it is a detailed lexicon of her world. Her play with a kitchen set is how she makes sense of her daily routines. The key insight is that even the youngest, pre-literate children are actively making meaning and have a complex inner world they can communicate with. It validates the use of this method for the youngest age groups (who are often excluded from research), proving they are not "pre-communicative" but simply use a different, visual language.

Unique findings and potential for impact

The intimate nature of this art-based approach revealed nuanced findings that are often difficult to capture through broader methods, offering direct pathways to influence humanitarian programs and policies.

The drawings consistently show that play is a generative force for well-being through which

children actively shape their own worlds rather than passively enduring their circumstances. As seen in the “egg game” drawing (Figure 2), children transform mundane objects and constrained spaces into rich, imaginative experiences. This act of world-building is more than just a pastime; it is an essential strategy for emotional survival, creating joy, building social networks, and fostering resilience in a highly restrictive humanitarian context. This creative agency is also evident in how they observe and document their physical world.

Through their drawings, children act as expert narrators of their lived realities. The boy who meticulously drew the garbage-filled drain and spiderwebs in the washroom (Figure 4) was not just complaining; he was providing expert testimony on the environmental health hazards he navigates daily. This child-led data offers a more immediate and compelling picture of camp life than any external assessment could. This detailed mapping of their physical space is matched by an equally nuanced navigation of their psychological landscape.

The recurring theme of a “dual home” reveals that children are navigating a complex, layered identity. As depicted by the young girl in Figure 1, children hold a sense of belonging to a place they might only know from stories while simultaneously adapting to their current reality. This finding challenges a monolithic view of the “refugee” experience and underscores the need for humanitarian programming that acknowledges and supports this dual identity. Just as they process this internal complexity, their play reveals a sophisticated engagement with the external social systems they inhabit.

Children’s depiction of adult roles demonstrates deep cognitive engagement through role-play. The drawings of a “medicine shop” (Figure 6) or a “sweets shop” (Figure 7) are more than simple mimicry; they reveal how children process and make sense of the social and economic structures around them. This role-play is a powerful expression of agency and growing social awareness, allowing children to explore responsibility and imagine futures beyond their current circumstances. The power of this art-based approach is its unique ability to make these complex cognitive processes visible, even in the youngest participants.

The success of this simple, low-cost method proves its value as an authentic and inclusive tool for participation. The drawings of the two-year-olds (Figure 8, Figure 9) prove that even pre-literate children can convey complex ideas through scribbles, offering a dignified research method which can overcome the barriers of language, trauma, or power dynamics.

These insights provide a direct feedback loop for refining child-centered programs across the humanitarian sector and especially for actors in the ECD in emergencies coordination group. The BRAC Humanitarian Play Lab (HPL) model, for instance, illustrates how these findings can be put into practice by aligning program elements with children’s expressed realities. For example, the recurring “dual home” theme points to the need for a curriculum that creates space for exploring memory and identity. Children’s detailed drawings of their homes and community spaces have already provided valuable guidance in shaping HPL interiors to feel more familiar and validating. The resourceful play depicted by the children also provides clear guidance on selecting materials that support their innate creativity. These principles extend beyond the HPL, offering a valuable framework for any humanitarian intervention aiming to be truly responsive to children’s lived experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS AND POLICYMAKERS

The insights gleaned from these children's drawings lead to five unique and actionable recommendations:



1. Institutionalize authentic child participation through dedicated teams and integrated funding. To move beyond ad-hoc efforts, organizations should invest in a core team along with trained, local facilitators responsible for carrying out participatory activities. Funders and agencies should mandate and fund these simple, low-cost methods, ensuring practitioners let the child lead the story by providing open spaces with minimal prompts. Furthermore, funding models should be adapted to tie implementation and research together from the project's inception, allowing insights to continuously inform and improve program design in real-time.



2. Integrate child-led environmental mapping into camp planning. Move beyond adult-led safety audits. Systematically use children's drawings as a standard tool in needs assessments. As shown in the drawing of the "Landscape of hazards" (Figure 4), children provide immediate, unfiltered data on risks like garbage-filled drains and unhygienic washrooms, offering direct, actionable intelligence for camp management and infrastructure improvements.



3. Design psychosocial programs for a "dual-home" identity. Acknowledge children's complex connection to their past. The drawing of the "camp house" and "Myanmar house" side-by-side (Figure 1) is a powerful reminder that children are integrating past and present. Mental Health and Psychosocial Support programs should create safe spaces for storytelling and art that allow children to explore these memories without pressure, fostering a healthy, layered identity.



4. Incorporate resource play that mimics and masters community life. Provide play materials that allow for the complex role-playing of adult activities. The “medicine shop” drawing (Figure 5) and the “sweets shop” (Figure 7) show how children use play to process and gain control over complex community systems. Stocking play spaces with materials for play shops, kitchens, and clinics supports this vital cognitive and coping mechanism.



5. Co-create play spaces with the community. Shift from installing prefabricated playgrounds to a co-creation model. Use children’s drawings and parents’ skills to design and build play spaces that are culturally relevant, use local materials, and reflect the actual play patterns and desires of the children—such as the imaginative “egg game” that transformed a narrow lane into a play space (Figure 2).

In the overwhelming complexity of a refugee camp, it is easy to overlook the small, quiet but crucial voice of a child, especially when humanitarian action moves quickly and is focused on the basics of food, water, shelter and health care. While acute humanitarian action will be fast and focused on the basics, most refugee situations last on average ten years, so there is time and opportunity to not only provide a breadth of services, but a depth of services (World Bank 2017). There is time in a protracted refugee situation like the Rohingya crisis to modify service provision to meet the needs and desires of affected communities, including young children. This study demonstrates that a piece of paper, a box of crayons, and conversations with children can become powerful megaphones that can improve the design, and implementation of policies in refugee contexts. The drawings of eight Rohingya children from the refugee camps offer more than a glimpse into their lives; they provide a profound and actionable roadmap for improving them. They show adults who make decisions on their behalf, based on assumptions about where they play, what they fear, who they love, and what they remember.

This work champions a fundamental shift in perspective: from seeing children as passive recipients of aid to recognizing them as experts in their own experience, whose insights are not just valuable, but essential. The power of this work lies in its replicability. The methodology is not resource-intensive and can be adapted to any humanitarian context. As funding for the Rohingya crisis and humanitarian work globally is diminishing, programs that are rooted in children’s lived experiences and culture that they can feel ownership over are more sustainable and better investments (Rogoff et al. 2018). Art is one of many types of participatory tools that can enable adults to see the world through young children’s eyes. This study reminds us that listening to young children is not an act of compassion alone, it is a pathway to more effective, humane, and evidence-based humanitarian action. When a child’s simple drawing can help shape decisions, we begin to create a world that finally sees and values every child’s voice. To build a better future for young children in crisis, we must first have the humility to listen, and to see the world as they draw it.

APPENDIX 1: A

RESEARCH AGENDA FOR CENTERING CHILD VOICE

To build upon this work and deepen the global evidence base, this case study proposes a forward-looking research agenda. The following recommendations are designed to guide researchers and funders in generating the rigorous, actionable evidence needed to inform the next generation of child-centered humanitarian policy and practice.

1. Shift to longitudinal and mixed-method designs. While valuable, cross-sectional studies provide only a static snapshot of the data. A more robust understanding requires a shift toward longitudinal research that follows cohorts of children over time, combined with a mixed-methods approach that triangulates arts-based data with ethnographic observation and other qualitative techniques.

Policy implication: Longitudinal data is critical for assessing the long-term impacts of displacement and intervention, allowing policymakers to move from short-term crisis response to evidence-based, durable solutions that support children’s developmental trajectories.

2. Systematize the analysis of the creative process. The act of creation is a rich source of data. Future research should develop and validate systematic protocols for documenting and analyzing the art-making process—including a child’s hesitations, color choices, erasures, and spontaneous verbalizations.

Policy implication: This “process data” can reveal subtle but critical insights into a child’s emotional state and cognitive processes, providing a more nuanced evidence base for the design of targeted psychosocial support and therapeutic interventions.

3. Invest in community-embedded research capacity. The success of this methodology was anchored in the long-term trust built by a facilitator from the community. Funders should prioritize strategic investments in training and supporting local, community-embedded researchers who possess the necessary linguistic and cultural competencies for authentic engagement.

Policy implication: This approach is not only more ethical but also yields higher-quality, more valid data. It builds sustainable local capacity, ensuring that research is a collaborative, empowering process rather than an extractive one, leading to more culturally resonant and effective policies.

4. Commission cross-context comparative analyses. To move beyond context-specific findings, funders and research institutions should commission comparative analyses of similar arts-based studies across diverse humanitarian settings.

Policy implication: Comparative analysis is essential for distinguishing between universal principles of child development in crisis and context-specific variables. This broader evidence base is necessary for developing global best practices, scalable models, and more effective, adaptable humanitarian policies.

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