

Capacity strengthening

Material support

Self-protection outside community protection structures

Social cohesion

 Bangladesh

Shining at night

Working with communities to reduce risk exposure at night

By Rokeya Begum, Protection Officer at Oxfam; Nur Jahan,¹ 32 years old, host community member from Hnila Union

Oxfam initiated its host community protection programme in Hnila Union in the Cox's Bazar district of Bangladesh in 2018. The district has a shared border with Myanmar, and Hnila hosts a large number of Rohingya refugees from that country. These large numbers of refugees have had a big impact on the local community. A portion of the population lost income, which has led to an increase in criminality. For this reason, many people fear moving from one place to another, especially at night, which negatively affects their daily work.

Through its protection-monitoring activities, Oxfam learned that refugee and host community members in Hnila Union were afraid of moving around after dark. Community members, especially Rohingya refugees, had imposed restrictions on themselves, not moving anywhere after sunset. Considering this situation and the protection risks, Oxfam installed 75 communal solar-powered streetlights in the area.

The locations of the lights were selected in a participatory manner. Oxfam conducted separate consultations with women, girls, men and boys to identify where the lights would bring benefits for the vulnerable sections of the population. We talked to people from both refugee and host communities, took note of their comments on where and how many lights they might need, and how they would improve their lives.

In order to ensure the sustainability of this initiative, Oxfam also created a maintenance group, composed of one man and one woman for each light. The maintenance group volunteers were trained by a mechanic provided by the vendor. The group also seeks to reduce some risks, for example by forbidding children from throwing stones at the light posts, or pulling on the wires.

'The whole area remained very dark, when there were no lights in this area. There was no way to go out for anything and people were in lots of trouble. Men couldn't go to the mosque, bazar or shop; women were afraid to use latrines, collect water or go to a doctor even in emergencies,' says Zafor,² a host community member who also volunteers in the maintenance group.

'After installing the communal lights, the area looks like a town and is beautiful. We are very happy to have the solar lights without any fixed electricity. The lights do not need us to charge them, and there are no kerosene lamps or torches that might go out. Now we can move freely at night. From evening to dawn, all the lights are lit brightly. We are very grateful to Oxfam for installing the lights.

1 Name has been changed to protect the person's identity.

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There are some lights provided by another organization, but they cover a very small area. Oxfam installed across a broader area covering solar lights first in our area. Now we are free from the fear of being attacked by someone. Men can go to the mosque, bazar and shop; and women can go to ponds to do ablutions (*wudu*) for prayer, water points to collect water, use latrines, and do any other courtyard-related work. Children can play outside in the evening. There was some smuggling and illegal business at night, but after the lights were installed, these incidents reduced. People used to stumble on the way to the latrines and ponds, and that's reduced now. We couldn't sleep peacefully for the fear of thieves. This is also reduced. Now we can sleep properly.'