

# **OVERCOMING CHALLENGES: THE STORY OF NGOS SERVING REFUGEES IN KLANG VALLEY, MALAYSIA**

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## ***Abstract***

There are currently more than 150,000 refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia. They face a number of challenges related to documentation, education, health, and employment. Malaysia is not a signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention of 1951, and assistance to the refugees from the Malaysian government is limited. In the absence of this assistance, refugee-focused Malaysian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) deliver much-needed services to refugees and asylum seekers. Despite their best efforts, however, the NGOs face challenges in providing services to refugees. They deal with these challenges through engaging with media, trust building, and adjusting their services to meet the cultural sensibilities of refugees. These strategies help refugees and asylum seekers build resilience, and allow NGOs to continue to provide services to them. While NGOs are playing important roles in the lives of refugees and asylum seekers, they cannot serve refugees alone; they need government support. This study recommends that Malaysian NGOs continue to advocate for the Malaysian government to sign and ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention, and engage the government to give work permits to refugees rather than importing labor.

## ***Introduction***

While many countries around the world host refugees, Southeast Asian countries are often the places of first asylum (Moon, 2016) for many refugees and asylum seekers from South Asia, Middle East, and Africa. A first-asylum country allows refugees to enter its territory temporarily, pending their resettlement to a third country or repatriation to their home

country. There are currently thirty-seven resettlement countries around the world in which the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) resettles refugees from countries of first asylum. The key legal instrument for the protection of refugees is the United Nations Refugee Convention of 1951, which requires its signatories to provide rights to life, property, and work to refugees. Countries of first asylum, however, may not be signatories to this convention. Currently, 145 countries have signed the convention, while 43 have not. Some countries do not sign the convention because they do not want to commit to taking care of refugees.

In Southeast Asia, only Cambodia and Philippines have signed or ratified the UN Refugee Convention of 1951 and its 1967 protocol. Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia—which host the highest number of refugees in Southeast Asia—have not signed the convention and therefore are not legally obliged to settle refugees and naturalize them. But simply signing the Refugee Convention does not guarantee the protection of refugees' rights. As Richard Towle, representative of UNHCR Malaysia has remarked, some signatories may not treat refugees well, and some non-signatories may serve them well (World101x, 2014).

Within Southeast Asia, Malaysia hosts the largest number of refugees and asylum seekers. According to UNHCR estimates, there are 155,880 refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia as of March 2018 (UNHCR Malaysia, 2018). More than 90 percent of the refugees in Malaysia come from Myanmar. The majority are Muslim. Muslim refugees from other countries of South Asia, Middle East and Africa prefer Malaysia because it is a predominantly Muslim country. In 2015, Malaysian Prime Minister, Najib Razak pledged to host 3,000 Syrian refugees in Malaysia in three years starting from 2015. (Channel Newsasia, 2 October 2015). The government has provided preferential treatment to Syrian refugees by allowing them to work legally, a privilege that it does not extend to refugees from Myanmar.

Though Malaysia does not recognize a distinction between refugees and asylum seekers, the distinction remains important. People who have received official cards from UNHCR certifying their status are refugees, and those waiting for the UNHCR card are asylum seekers. Asylum seekers may face more challenges than refugees because they lack documentation. *Malaysia's Unwanted*, a documentary on refugees' lives in Malaysia, states that "Kuala Lumpur has one of the world's largest populations of people seeking asylum." (Al-Jazeera, 2014).

Most of the refugees and asylum seekers in Malaysia live in Klang Valley, which comprises Kuala Lumpur and the surrounding cities (Hoffstaedter, 2015: 188). There are no refugee camps in Malaysia; refugees and asylum seekers live in low-income areas of the Klang Valley. NGOs reach out to these urban refugees and asylum seekers to serve their needs. This study is about these NGOs, their services, and their

challenges in an urban context. It specifically investigates how NGOs can overcome obstacles related to serving different refugees groups in Klang Valley to deliver better health-, education-, and employment-related services. Finally, it will highlight the problems and opportunities of working for urban refugees in Southeast Asia.

## *Literature review*

This study draws on two themes in academic literature: urban refugees in Malaysia, and NGOs in Malaysia. The current scholarship on refugees in Malaysia highlights the problems refugees face while living in Klang Valley and other urban centers in the country (Hoffstaedter 2014; Azis 2014; Nah 2007 & 2010).

Complementing the work of scholars, various humanitarian organizations have produced grey literature on refugees in Malaysia, providing useful insights into the challenges facing refugees in Malaysia. This literature highlights the ill-treatment of refugees at the hands of police and other law enforcement agencies. As noted, Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, and therefore is not bound to provide services to refugees it is hosting. Hoffstaedter argues that “[i]n the absence of legal protection and broader social recognition, refugees experience Malaysia as a site of liminality.” In fact, the refugees are also “systematically disadvantaged” in Malaysia (Nah 2013).

This literature also highlights the most important issue for refugees: survival. Both the scholarly and grey literature have addressed survival. For example, Nah (2014) has explored self-help networks of refugees to meet their own needs, making it clear that self-help is an important strategy for refugee survival. Overall, this literature does not address how Malaysian society contributes to the self-help strategies of refugees. It does not specifically investigate the nongovernmental actors, which help refugees survive. Overall, the literature on refugees and their survival is not extensive, and Malaysia is regarded as a “comparatively less studied” case with regard to refugees (Hedman 2008).

From what has been written on the role of NGOs in Malaysian society, we know that those organizations are contributing to the lives of citizens in important ways (Weiss & Hassan, 2003; Alatas 1997). In his book, Alatas (1997) argued that NGOs were playing an important role in Malaysia, but their role was limited to developmental activities and they were excluded from the political arena. Although NGOs in Malaysia have grown since Alatas published his book, his observation remains relevant.

The point of departure from Alatas’s study is that there are many NGOs that do not provide services to Malaysian citizens, but rather, only to non-citizens—i.e. refugees and stateless people—and that this priority is a *political* act. The NGOs also undertake advocacy on the politically

sensitive issue of refugees. These NGOs can be defined as “refugee-focused,” and they are another mechanism contributing to the survival of refugees. Little has been written on the role of these NGOs. In particular, there has been almost no focus on the challenges of these NGOs in Klang Valley, Malaysia.

The role of refugee-focused NGOs can be understood in relation to the work of UNHCR. UNHCR complements the refugee-focused NGOs and plays an important role in their work. Nah argues, however, that the Malaysian state restricts that role of UNHCR in helping refugees settle down in Malaysia. Given this, how does the Malaysian state interact with the refugee-focused NGOs? We know little about it. Equally, we know little about how refugee-focused NGOs are contributing to the empowerment of refugees, and how refugees are using NGOs services to their advantage. This paper seeks to explain how NGOs are providing services to refugees, what their challenges are, and how those challenges can be overcome.

## *Methodology*

Data was collected using observations, in-depth interviews, and documentary analysis. The many hours spent observing refugees’ lives, participating in the everyday activities of refugee families, visiting five schools and two health centers, and visiting refugees in their homes helped build an understanding of how refugees spend their time and how they interact with families. Observations at the NGOs illustrated how NGOs treated and helped refugees.

The main data-generating method was a series of in-depth interviews conducted between October 2017 and January 2018. Twenty leaders and senior managers from fifteen NGOs were interviewed, using a snowball method of sampling. Like many places, NGOs in Malaysia work with limited staff and their leadership are generally very busy, limiting their availability for interviews. In addition to interviewing NGO staff (for 60 minutes on average), I interviewed twenty-three refugee students and twenty refugee parents (20 minutes on average), and held six interviews with refugee scholars and refugee activists. Two officials at UNHCR Malaysia were also interviewed. Most of the interviews were conducted in English, with a few interviews with Rohingya refugees conducted in Urdu. A translator helped with interviews with Syrian refugees; those interviews were conducted in Malay.

The in-depth interviews with NGO leaders and senior managers explored the backgrounds, histories, and organizational structures of the NGOs. Interviewees were asked to explain the different services and programs of their NGO and the development of these programs. Understanding how and why the NGOs initiated programs for refugees—and the challenges and obstacles faced by those organizations—was a

particular focus. Interviewees were asked to elaborate how NGOs were dealing with those challenges, and to discuss the sources of funding, the dynamics of NGOs' relationships with the Malaysian government, NGO advocacy, and their plans for the future.

## *Key challenges faced by refugees in Malaysia*

Refugees and asylum seekers face a number of challenges in Malaysia primarily because the government does not officially recognize them, and instead considers them to be illegal immigrants. Malaysia also lacks legal arrangements for refugees' regulation, which makes the lives of refugees unpredictable and difficult. Hoffstaedter (2015, 202) asserts that "[t]he legal non-recognition of refugees in Malaysia continues to be the greatest hurdle for improving the well-being and protection space for refugees, especially around work rights." Because of this, the refugees and asylum seekers live in fear of being arrested and detained. They face particular challenges in four areas: documentation, education, healthcare, and employment. Linguistic and cultural challenges also present particular problems for this population.

### *Challenges related to documentation*

The most important challenges refugees and asylum seekers face grow out of their lack of official documentation. UNHCR states that it had registered 155,880 individuals by end of March 2018. UNHCR, the Malaysian government, and local NGOs, however, do not necessarily agree on the number of *unregistered* refugees. UNHCR estimates it to range from 30,000 to 40,000 (UNHCR, email, 2 April 2018). Many NGO leaders I interviewed believe that 40 to 50 percent of refugees do not have documentation.<sup>1</sup>

There are many problems associated with securing this documentation, which generally takes the form of a UNHCR card. The UNHCR schedules refugee status determination (RSD) interviews with the applicant so the applicant can receive a refugee card. UNHCR may take many months or years to issue a refugee card. Though Malaysian NGOs help refugees prepare applications for UNHCR, the UNHCR process is independent and cannot be accelerated through external pressures.

While the UNHCR card establishes recognition as a refugee to its holder, it is not an alternative to official recognition. It reduces—but does not eliminate—the risk of arrest and detention. For the past few years, the Malaysian authorities have been lenient on cardholders. Additionally, while the UNHCR card is not a *de facto* work permit, cardholders find it easier to

find work than non-cardholders, and they tend to feel relatively secure. Lately, the police and other law enforcement agencies have not been arresting cardholders, which would cause them to be imprisoned in detention centers.

Theoretically, UNHCR is obliged to resettle cardholders to third countries, i.e. resettlement countries. However, the process of resettlement may take years and depends on the quotas of the resettlement countries. The resettlement countries may have preferences for refugees of particular ethnic or religious groups. For example, some Rohingya refugees believe that the US prefers to resettle Chin refugees who are primarily Christians. This could just be a perception among Muslim refugees, however, as some Rohingya refugees have in fact been resettled in other countries. True or false, this perception is important. It means that ethnic and religious divisions exist among refugee communities, which in turn poses a barrier to unifying refugees to protect themselves in Malaysia.

### *Challenges related to education*

Lack of access to children's education is a critical challenge for refugee parents. Malaysian public schools do not enroll refugee or stateless children. The only educational options for refugee children are schools run by NGOs, or self-help schools set up by refugee organizations themselves. According to UNHCR Malaysia, 30 percent of primary school-aged refugee children are enrolled in schools (Sayed & Choi, 2018); only 16 percent of children aged 14 to 17 have enrolled in secondary education (UNHCR, 2018).

Students at both primary and secondary levels face many issues related to language, culture, and interrupted learning due to the breakdown of education in their countries of origin. Many refugee children join schools in Malaysia without any school experience or after their education has been interrupted, making it difficult for these children to perform well in schools. Inability to speak Bahasa Melayu (the local language) is also a challenge. Many refugee parents cannot help their children with homework due to these linguistic issues, which also puts their children at a disadvantage. Other challenges that can affect students' educational success include parents' illiteracy, lack of education, or engagement with work.

Beyond linguistic barriers and parental limitations, refugee students face many additional problems. Some of them are irregular in attendance, while others drop out of school. There are particular challenges with girls' education: some Syrian and Rohingya refugees do not send daughters to school. It is difficult for the staff of NGOs that manage schools for refugees to convince parents to enroll their daughters. Some Rohingya girls drop

out of school around the age of 14 or 15 to get married. NGO leaders have said that sometimes students discontinue education without appropriately informing them, resulting in the waste of valuable NGO resources.

The UNHCR refers refugee children to NGO schools, which it recognizes. (Interview, 13 November 2017). Most NGOs only enroll children in school if they have already obtained a UNHCR card. This means children not registered with UNHCR do not have the same educational opportunities. Delays play a role, as well. A Pakistani refugee mother explained that she waited for the UNHCR card for more than two years, during which time her children were ineligible to enroll in school.

Students enrolled in secondary education follow the Cambridge IGCSE (International General Certificate for Secondary Education) curriculum, which is in English and, as a result, highly challenging. Yet most of the secondary level students interviewed were learning well, and had clear ideas of what they wanted to become in life after secondary school. Though these students are highly motivated to complete their education and progress to universities, there are few opportunities for them to fulfill their dreams without the ability to enroll in Malaysian universities for higher education. Currently, only a few universities in Malaysia are willing to enroll refugee students who complete secondary education. Students expressed their desire for the Malaysian government to require the country's universities to allow enrollment by refugee students.

### *Challenges related to health*

Refugees face immense challenges in accessing health services in Malaysia. One reason is because public sector health services are expensive. Even though UNHCR cardholders receive a 50 percent discount on medical bills, it is still difficult for many refugees to afford health services. Accessing health services is particularly difficult for those without a UNHCR card. Since the staff at government hospitals may report them to the police, undocumented refugees avoid visiting government hospitals.

Some refugees reported that hospitals charged them higher fees than they charged Malaysian citizens. A policy enacted in April 2017 mandated that non-Malaysians are required to pay medical fees considerably higher than what citizens pay. Some health facilities categorize refugees as non-citizens, and ask them to pay a medical fee equal to the rate for foreigners, which many refugees cannot afford to pay. Many refugees reported that they are unable to seek treatment for many ailments, especially those that require surgery.

Accessing medical services is particularly difficult for pregnant women; it is difficult for them to deliver in a hospital because of the high cost. A pregnant refugee woman told about her inability to pay for her delivery, which caused her severe worry about her health and the health of her unborn child (Interview, 10 December 2017). A mother of four told me she did not take her youngest son to the hospital for a serious illness because it was too expensive (Interview, 15 December 2017). Many refugees are living with serious medical issues without any chance of diagnosis or treatment.

### ***Challenges related to employment and livelihood***

Additional critical challenges of refugees are the lack of legal employment opportunities and absence of labor rights. Many of the refugees with a UNHCR card can find employment. However, the UNHCR card is not a de facto work permit. Meanwhile, undocumented refugees experience serious problems in finding employment. The opportunity to work and earn a livelihood can save refugees and asylum seekers, and their families, from extreme poverty and deprivation. In order to survive, refugees and asylum seekers take on difficult jobs without adequate compensation or labor rights. Most of the refugees have stories to tell of difficult work, and work undertaken without adequate pay. Currently, many refugees take jobs which Malaysian citizens do not want, such as cleaning, washing, construction, lawn maintenance, and food service. Many refugees explained that they have to work for long hours. They complained of not getting paid on time and working without labor contracts. Sometimes they have to work during holidays. Refugees who are fluent in Bahasa Melayu and English generally enjoy more success at getting jobs. Conversely, newcomers who cannot speak Bahasa Melayu face difficulties in finding work.

Many refugees demand the legal right to work in Malaysia. In interviews, many refugees stressed that they are not asking for charity, but for permission to work legally so that they can earn livelihoods. Most of the NGO leaders interviewed also support provision of the right to work. They suggest that the Malaysian government set up an economic corridor in which refugees can legally work. Mohammad Said, Head of Programme Development & Operations for Mercy Malaysia, made a detailed case for such an economic corridor. He asserted that an “economic corridor will not only be beneficial for refugees, but for the Malaysian economy also” (Interview, 12 December 2017).

Another suggestion from NGO leadership is that instead of importing foreign labor from neighboring countries, the Malaysian government should employ refugees. This demand is justifiable as many



refugees have been living in Malaysia for decades, speak Bahasa Melayu, and have learned skills that are locally in demand.

### *Challenges related to language and culture*

Though many refugees have learned the Malay language, some remain unfamiliar with Malay language, culture and customs. Because the government does not facilitate the learning of Bahasa Melayu by refugees, those refugees must find a way to learn it on their own. Some refugees, especially newcomers, have to go a long way to learn Malay. Many refugees are convinced, moreover, that it will be difficult for them to navigate Malaysian society without learning both Bahasa Melayu and English. This is a double linguistic obstacle, but it appears to be surmountable. Many of the refugee students I interviewed reported that they were able to converse in Bahasa Melayu. The secondary school students tended to be fluent in English, as well, because they are taught in English.

Culture, too, is a continuing challenge. Although the fact that the Muslim religion is shared by Rohingya and Malays helps somewhat, the overall lack of cultural understanding on the part of refugees nevertheless prevents many from integrating with Malaysian society. Malay cultural practices such as choice marriage and dowry are unknown to many refugees. In short, cultural differences play an important role in maintaining distance between host and refugee populations.

### *Challenges for NGOs that work with refugee populations*

NGOs working with refugees face a number of challenges. Among the most significant of those challenges is a lack of precise data, which hinders the NGOs as they seek to design adequate responses to the problems of refugees, and lobby for their cause. Even more fundamentally, in the absence of reliable data regarding how many refugees there are and where they live, NGOs have a hard time even reaching refugees.

Apart from the lack of data, NGOs face four kinds of challenges: inadequate funding, language and cultural barriers, lack of trust, and lack of governmental support.

### *The funding challenge*

The first challenge most NGOs face is lack of funding. Only Malaysian Humanitarian Aid and Relief (MAHAR) has a reliable source of

funding—in that case the government of Malaysia. MAHAR was founded in 2016 by Dato Seri Dr. Ahmad Zahid bin Hamidi, who was deputy prime minister of Malaysia. Its primary purpose is to provide assistance in documenting Syrian refugees.

Other NGOs struggle to secure funding from various sources, and most don't have secure sources of funding for more than a year at a time. Educational efforts pose particular funding issues. NGOs cannot apply for corporate funding for their educational activities because their schools are not registered with the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education had announced a plan to give licenses to NGO schools in early 2017, but that plan has not been implemented. The Ministry held a couple of meetings with NGO representatives but did not finalize the process for awarding licenses.<sup>2</sup>

Many NGOs cannot make longer-term plans because they are not sure about securing the money that will be needed over time to support their projects. In the absence of secure financial commitments, NGOs recruit volunteers for their services. The volunteers contribute significantly to the activities of NGOs, but it is sometimes difficult to maintain the volunteers' commitment on a sustainable basis.

### *The challenge of language and culture*

Differences in language and culture between NGO staff and refugee populations can have a negative impact on the relationship between NGOs and refugees. Though many refugees have learned Bahasa Melayu, some cannot speak it. As a result, it is difficult for NGOs to fully understand the problems and aspirations of these refugees, and to address their needs. Serious language problems have arisen in interactions with recently arriving Syrian refugees—for example—and while some NGOs have employed Arabic-speaking volunteers to work with Syrian refugees, volunteers are not always available. In the absence of volunteers, NGOs identify English-speaking interpreters from within the refugee communities to help translate. NGOs struggle to learn about the culture of refugees to make their services sensitive to the refugees' cultures. In many cases, however, NGO staff feel that refugees are not open to sharing their thoughts and feelings—again impeding the flow of important information.

### *The challenge of trust*

A related issue is trust. Some refugees believe that NGOs work for the government, and spy on them.<sup>3</sup> Some perceive NGOs as a threat to their refugee status.<sup>4</sup> Some refugees, especially those who have UNHCR cards, change their phone numbers for various reasons, which sometimes make them untraceable.<sup>5</sup>

For their part, some NGO staffers believe that refugees can become too dependent on charity, arguing that refugees need to be more independent and actively help themselves. They also said that refugees did not share their “real selves” with the NGOs, making it difficult for NGOs to understand refugees’ motivations and aspirations.<sup>6</sup> For example, refugee students sometimes discontinue their education without informing the schools or NGOs beforehand, causing NGOs to waste already meager resources.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to a lack of trust between NGOs and refugees, there are also issues of mistrust within and among refugee communities. The Rohingya refugee community, for example, has many leaders claiming to be the only authentic leader. NGO leadership reports that as a result, it is sometimes difficult to create consensus among various Rohingya groups on issues affecting their community. Obviously, it is more challenging to help refugees who don’t speak with one voice.

### *Lack of government support*

Though the Malaysian government quietly supports refugee-focused work by the NGOs, this support is not considered sufficient. Though NGO leadership generally appreciates that the government does not interfere with their everyday activities, they also assert that government does not support them enough.<sup>8</sup>

NGOs expect two kinds of support from the government: first, financial support, and second, responsiveness to NGOs’ advocacy and lobbying for the protection of refugees.<sup>9</sup> The NGOs in this study have been asking the Prime Minister to sign the 1951 Refugee Convention. NGOs are also lobbying the government to give work permits to refugees, but the government is not receptive to this demand. A partial response came when, in February 2017, Deputy Prime Minister/Home Minister announced a pilot project to give work permits to 300 Rohingya to work in the plantations and manufacturing sectors. The plan was proposed by the UNHCR, Malaysia (Jah, 13 January 2017). However, there were problems with this initiative: issuing only 300 permits was not enough to have a significant impact on the problem, and the government did not scale up the project over time to expand the number of available work permits. With regards to educational initiatives, NGOs have also made demands for the federal government to officially register the schools that they operate. Though the Ministry of Education has held a few meetings on the issue, it has not yet decided to extend official registration to NGO schools.

## ***NGOs' strategies to overcome challenges Engagement with media***

The refugee-focused NGOs continuously and proactively engage with the media, especially newspapers and other print media, to raise awareness that may in turn lead to raising funds. Public opinion about refugees remains divided in Malaysia, and it is important to continuously highlight refugee issues in media to win the support of citizens for refugee causes.

Despite the Malaysian government's official positions, , sometimes individual statements by politicians create difficulties for NGOs. One such statement was issued by the Deputy Home Minister in June 2016, in which he warned UNHCR not to portray Malaysia as a refugee destination country.<sup>10</sup>

## ***Engagement with government and other stakeholders***

Continuous engagement with ministries such as the Ministry of Education; the Ministry of Health; the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development; and the Ministry of Home Affairs in Malaysian government is an important strategy of refugee-focused NGOs. NGOs often invite government officers to their events to sensitize them about refugee issues. At these events, NGOs encourage interaction between government officers and refugees, which helps both parties understand each other.

NGOs are also proactively involved in making policy suggestions to the government for the protection and well-being of refugees. NGO leadership believe that these activities help them win concessions for the refugees from the government.<sup>11</sup> One success came in 2017, when the Malaysian government expressed its intention to find solutions to refugees' problems. By all accounts, the NGOs played a major role in putting refugee issues on the political agenda.<sup>12</sup>

A specific example of effective NGO engagement with the government came when Yayasan Chow Kit, an NGO, designed and implemented a six-month training course for officials from the Ministry of Education to help them deal with refugee children. The course aimed to sensitize the government officers to the different needs, attitudes, and educational aspirations of the refugee children; feedback from trainees indicated that it was successful in doing so. Another NGO, MAHAR, also organizes sensitization and experience-sharing sessions for officials in the Ministry of Home Affairs, to convey the distinctive problems and needs of refugees. Ideas Academy and Jasmin Ash-Sham School have also been working with government officials in the Ministry of Education. The head of Imam, a NGO focused on refugee health, reported that their relationship

with the Ministry of Health is very useful for their work. As the work of Imam depends on volunteer health professionals, the Ministry of Health supports the doctors and nurses volunteering for Imam to take leave from their hospitals during those periods.

NGOs engage with politicians from both the ruling and opposition political parties. Their heads regularly meet various politicians, brief them about their work, and invite them to their seminars and workshops. They also engage with bureaucrats, businesses, and academics. These engagements are important to NGOs' advocacy, and contribute to keeping refugees issues at the forefront of the political agenda in Malaysia.

### *Cultural and religious sensitivity*

It is generally easier for NGOs to overcome cultural barriers with Muslim refugees from Myanmar, Syria, and elsewhere, as compared to relationships with other groups. The NGOs offer religious studies classes to Muslim students and help them learn about Islam. Integrating the religious beliefs of many refugees into their services helps NGOs build trust with refugees. The NGOs have helped refugees set up their own marriage registration mechanisms, again strengthening bonds between NGOs and refugee-led community organizations. Some NGOs encourage refugee students to learn Bahasa Melayu and Malay customs, and teach them to their parents. NGOs also encourage their staff to learn about the cultural and religious practices of refugees. Some refugees invite NGO workers to various events at their homes and community gathering places. It should be noted, however, that non-Muslim refugees—such as Chin from Myanmar—are sometimes excluded from these overtures and events.

### *Alliances with refugee leaders*

In order to earn the trust of refugees, the NGOs have built strong alliances with the leaders of refugee communities. For example, MAPIM, an NGO, holds regular meetings on refugee issues and their solutions with refugee leaders. The leaders of Malaysian Life Line for Syria and ASEAN Rohingya Center regularly visit leaders of refugee communities at their homes. NGOs also include refugees in their advocacy programs, and in their efforts to lobby the government to protect refugees. NGOs also mediate meetings between refugee leaders and government officers. NGOs have trained many refugee leaders in highlighting the issues of their communities in Malaysia.

As a result, many refugee leaders are effectively representing their communities to government, NGOs, and the media. Again, alliances with refugee leaders help NGOs win the trust of refugees.

### ***Networking among NGOs***

Most NGOs are part of organizational networks that make their work more effective, in part by pooling their limited resources for action and advocacy. In that spirit, MAPIM has established a Malaysia-wide network of around 200 NGOs. These NGOs work on seventeen different issues of human development, including the protection and welfare of refugees. Similarly, ASEAN Rohingya Centre (ARC) is a network of NGOs, activists, and academicians working on refugee issues in Malaysia. The ARC director runs a WhatsApp group where members share their work and suggest ways that members can overcome day-to-day problems. UNIROD (United Islamic Rohingya Organization for Development) is another WhatsApp group where NGO officials exchange information on refugee issues. This exchange extends beyond sharing information to pooling resources, as well.

Most of the NGO leadership agreed that they are more effective when they form networks. The refugee organizations and activists particularly benefit from these NGOs networks. Despite this record of success, there is a feeling among smaller NGOs that the bigger NGOs in the networks sometimes ignore their needs.

### ***Promoting volunteerism***

Given their limited staffing and funding levels, most NGOs rely on volunteers to deliver their services. However, as noted, volunteers can't always be relied upon to contribute consistently and effectively. In response, some NGOs have launched volunteer training programs. For example: MAHAR, an NGO, recruits volunteers from MyCorps—the Malaysian government's volunteer program—to work on its initiatives for refugees.

More broadly, NGOs take volunteers from different walks of life and train them in humanitarian service delivery including shelter, education, health and psychological support. Yayasan Chow Kit and Ideas Academy, for example, have many volunteers who provide instruction and psychological help to the students. Imam has more than two hundred volunteers, who help to set up and run its medical camps.

Because volunteers are not paid, NGOs don't expect them to follow their schedules and targets precisely. One successful tactic is to use volunteers in activities in which they tend to be most effective. For example, volunteers are particularly helpful in fundraising drives. They set up stalls, carry out the campaigns, and explain refugees' needs to citizens and potential donors.

In summary, NGOs employ a number of tactics to overcome their challenges. They create engagements with media, government, and civil society; they build alliances with refugee leaders; they establish networks

amongst themselves; and they harness volunteerism among Malaysians to serve refugees. These tactics help make NGOs resilient in the face of their challenges, and help them provide services despite limited financial and human resources.

No matter how effective these tactics may be, in the absence of strong government support, there is a limit to what NGOs can achieve. The next section provides recommendations for making NGOs more effective.

## *Policy recommendations*

This section addresses how to strengthen the work NGOs are doing for refugees, what else NGOs can do to achieve their objectives, and who should provide support for their work. Both short-term and long-term recommendations are addressed.

### *Short-term recommendations for NGOs*

NGOs need to:

- **Strengthen their networks** to pool resources and share them, especially with smaller NGOs. Currently, NGOs rely on a variety of networks, but because not all of their member NGOs are active, these networks need to be strengthened. The networks need to provide equal opportunities to their member NGOs to participate in network activities.
- **Support leaders of the refugee communities** in serving their communities more effectively. For example, NGOs can expand their training programs on UNHCR's role for refugees, which will be helpful for refugees who are seeking documentation. The NGOs can also expand their training programs to educate refugees in developing their skills and finding employment. They should provide training to the refugee leaders in self-help community work. For example, the refugee leaders need to be trained in organizing education for children. They should also be trained in organizing savings programs, and using the capital generated by those programs to provide loans to members for starting small businesses.

### *Long-term recommendations for NGOs*

NGOs need to:

- **Continue lobbying both the Malaysian government and political parties** to sign and ratify UN refugee convention 1951. If government signs and ratifies it, the NGOs can make claims on government funds and services for the refugees. NGOs can also legally collaborate with the Malaysian government to provide services to refugees. If the NGOs create sufficient public pressure, they can probably convince the Malaysian government to sign the refugee convention. To achieve this important end, NGOs need to create broad-based alliances with stakeholders such as academia, businesses, and faith-based organizations.
- **Strengthen their engagements with parliamentarians and bureaucrats** to convince them to give work permits to refugees, instead of importing labor from Asian countries. As the Malaysian economy expands, there is a demand for more labor, which refugees can fulfill. This research has found that refugees prefer work permits rather than charity. With legal work permits, the refugees can help themselves and can contribute to the Malaysian society and economy.
- **Collect data on refugees** and make plans based on that data. NGOs can collect data on refugees with the help of refugee leaders, UNHCR, and the Ministry of Home Affairs. Both UNHCR and the Ministry of Home Affairs need accurate data to respond to the needs of refugees, and they may well support data-collection activities. The fact is that refugees will be staying in Malaysia for a long time. There are little chances that they will be resettled to the resettlement countries, or repatriated to their countries of origin. It is only prudent for NGOs to have adequate data on refugee health, employment, education, and residence.
- **Make the Malaysian people aware** that the refugees will stay in Malaysia for a long time. They should also convince Malaysian people that refugees' longer stay in Malaysia would be useful for Malaysian economy, as most of the refugees will be participating in the Malaysian economy. This will help persuade Malaysian citizens to continue providing financial and human resources to NGOs.
- **Convince the leaders of refugee communities** to eliminate their disagreements and become united to serve their people. NGOs need to address this issue at the level of their networks. Admittedly, this will require patience and persistence, as it can take a long time to diffuse the differences among the leaders of refugee communities. In



fact, some of the refugee leaders realize the need to eliminate their differences with other leaders, but they hesitate to start the process of building confidence. NGOs can play an important role in starting a fruitful dialogue among refugee leaders.

### *Short-term recommendations for government*

The Ministry of Education should:

- **Expedite giving licenses to NGOs schools** for refugees. In its meetings with NGOs in 2017, the Ministry expressed its willingness to extend licenses to NGOs schools. The Ministry needs to keep that promise. The Ministry also needs to allow refugees to enroll in Malaysian universities.
- **Provide subsidized health services** to refugees, including free medical checkups. By providing medical services to refugees, the Malaysian government help dispel the perception among Malaysians that refugees are responsible for spreading disease.
- **Play a durable role** in ensuring that its agencies protect the rights of the refugees. It needs to deputize either the Ministry of Home Affairs or a new, specialized agency to liaise with the UNHCR and regulate the refugees.
- **Support the work of people concerned with refugees** such as academics, refugee rights activists, and faith-based supporters of refugee-focused NGOs. The government needs to provide financial assistance and information to the people working on refugees. The government also needs to support UNHCR and NGOs efforts in providing education and health services to refugees.

### *Long-term recommendations for government*

The Malaysian government should:

- **Take steps to implement the NGOs' idea** of establishing an economic corridor for refugees. An economic corridor can absorb the refugee population, and Malaysian society can benefit from it. Such an economic corridor could provide infrastructure to facilitate small businesses being set up by the refugees, and could offer tax breaks to them.
- **Accede to the UNHCR demand of signing** onto the UN Refugee Convention 1951 and its Protocol of 1967. The Malaysian government has not signed the Refugee Convention because it believes that signing it will attract more refugees. In addition, the Malaysian government will

have to settle more than 150,000 refugees, if it signs the refugee convention. By giving work permits to refugees, the Malaysian government can make the refugees productive for Malaysian economy and can reduce its reliance on foreign labor.

## *Conclusion*

The refugee-focused NGOs in Malaysia provide an interesting case study for understanding how to deliver much-needed services to diverse refugee populations—particularly in circumstances when the host government is not legally obliged to protect refugees by virtue of not being a signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention 1951.

Despite being a non-signatory, the Malaysian government quietly lets NGOs work for refugees, and allows NGOs to contribute to the well being of tens of thousands of refugees. The key challenges that NGOs face relate to the lack of funding, cultural and linguistic differences, a lack of trust, and a lack of support from the government. The NGOs make active efforts to overcome these challenges.

As this paper has shown, Malaysian NGOs are in a better position than the Malaysian government to deliver the much-needed services to refugees, in part because they are flexible enough to adapt to the cultural and religious sensibilities of refugees. The government of Malaysia, by contrast, has not gained the experience needed to serve the needs of refugees. Over the years, NGOs have learned to reach and serve the refugees living in urban areas in Klang Valley. In a sense, Malaysian NGOs are resilient, as they are able to adapt to the circumstances in which they find themselves. They have built resilience by collecting funds from the individual and corporate donors, by training volunteers, and by building alliances with refugee leaders. However, the NGOs need government support to deal with their challenges.

A study of refugee-focused NGOs is important because those NGOs serve the needs of refugees and asylum seekers who are not served by the state in the realms of education, health, and employment. NGOs make efforts to sensitize the Malaysian state to protect the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, even when the state does not officially recognize them. They build alliances with their donors and build resilience by recruiting volunteers to deliver their services. They also build the capacity of refugee-led NGOs to serve the needs of their respective communities. They have established coalitions with the leaders of refugee communities and supporters of refugees' rights in academia, businesses, and society.

This paper illustrates that refugee-focused Malaysian NGOs survive and thrive because they are able to build resilience through the strategies of building coalitions and networks, gaining the trust of refugees, and refugee-rights stakeholders and training volunteers. These strategies may provide insights for the work of NGOs in other parts of the world with large refugee populations facing similar challenges.

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## *Appendix*

<b>No.</b>	<b>Name of Interviewee</b>	<b>Organization of Interviewee</b>	<b>Position of Interviewee</b>
1	Ananti Rajasingham	Yayasan Chow Kit	Chief Operating Officer
2	Sopiah Suid	Ideas Academy	General Manager
3	Darshini Nadarajan	Ideas Academy	Development Manager
4	Tunku Zain Al-Abidin Ibni Tuanku Muhriz	Ideas Academy	Founding President
5	Wan Saiful Wan Jan	Ideas Academy	Vice Chairman
6	Mohd Fadhil bin Baharudin	Malaysian Relief Agency	International Operation Coordinator
7	HJH. Fauziah Tahar	Malaysian Relief Agency	Senior Manager
8	Ahmad Fahmi Mohd Samsudin	Global Peace Mission	Chief Executive Officer
9	Sharlina Adnan	Islamic Relief Malaysia	Director, Domestic Programs
10	Mohammad Said Alhudzari bin Ibrahim	Mercy Malaysia	Head, Programme Development & Operations
11	Mohd Hazimi Che Abdul Rani	Mercy Malaysia	Volunteer Management Officer
12	Jismi Johari	Malaysian Humanitarian and Relief	Chairman
13	Tuan Mohammad Hakimi bin Tuan Ibrahim	Malaysian Humanitarian Aid and Relief	Project Officer
14	Dr. Mohd Helmi Ibrahim	Asean Rohingya Center	Executive Director
15	Sharifah Bt Husain	Rohingya Women Development Network	Head
16	Haji Mohd Azmi Abdul Hamid	Malaysian Consultative Council for Islamic Organization (MAPIM)	President
17	Ustaz Rafik	Humanitarian Aid Selangor	Head
18	Dr. Ahmad Munawwar Helmi b Salim	Imam Response	Head
19	Syahrir Azfar Saleh	Malaysian Life Line for	Chief Executive Officer

		Syria	
20	Ahmad Khola	Malaysia Life Line for Syria	IT Executive
21	Hasrol Sazli Abd Khair	Jasmine Ash Sham Education Centre	Manager
22	Shreevidya a/p Anandan	Yayasan Hasanah	Assistant Vice President Community Development
23	Faisal Bo Min Naing	Rohingya Society in Malaysia	President
24	Abdul Ghani bin Abdul Rahman	Rohingya Society in Malaysia	Deputy President
25	Nor Arlene Tan	Hidden Asia Media	Co-Founder

**Table 1.** Interviewees and their affiliations

## *Notes*

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- <sup>1</sup> “Documentation” here means a UNHCR card and letter.
- <sup>2</sup> Interviews with Sopiah Suid & Wan Saiful, 11.11.17 and 11.27.17
- <sup>3</sup> Interview, Zia ur Rahman, 01.19.18
- <sup>4</sup> Interview, Abdul Ghani bin Abdul Rahman, 01.20.18
- <sup>5</sup> Interview, Jismi Johari, 12.12.17
- <sup>6</sup> Interview, Cikgu Azmi, 12.12.17
- <sup>7</sup> Interview, Sopiah Suid, 11.11.17
- <sup>8</sup> Interview, Sopiah Suid, 11.19.17
- <sup>9</sup> Interview, Ahmad Fahmi, 01.05.18
- <sup>10</sup> *Free Malaysia Today*, 06.22.16
- <sup>11</sup> Interview, Jismi Johari, 12.12.17
- <sup>12</sup> Interview, Sopiah Suid, 11.15.17