Reimagining Refugee Integration, Realizing Sustainable Development Goals:

The Cases of Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Japan

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ABSTRACT

Refugee populations play an important role in realizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Where refugee populations are highly integrated into the host country's societal structure, they serve as facilitators and/or actors in the fulfilling the SDGs, both within their own community and in the extended hosting society. In countries where refugee populations are not officially recognized, they are often left behind. This policy brief summarizes a range of empirical and conceptual papers, debating the current refugee integration and SDGs-related initiatives in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Japan.

While refugee integration is still viable in these four countries, challenges and barriers are remained systemic. This calls for the reimagining of current refugee integration initiatives, and leveraging the collective vision of the SDGs.

The initiative aimed at generating new ideas, innovations and concepts that stimulate the reimagining of integration, through, or as the result of the implementation of the Sustainable development Goals (SDGs). The initiative was guided by two main research inquiries.

- First, how the implementation of SDGs creates, builds on and/or paves the way for a stronger refugee integration.

- Secondly, how the existing refugee activities and livelihood strategies create opportunities to strengthening integration.

Note: Full articles of the young scholars' papers will be published in an edited book in 2021.

About the Initiative

Institute of Malaysian & International Studies (IKMAS), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) organized a series of research and capacity building sessions for young scholars from October 2020 to December 2020.

Eight young scholars from Malaysia (4), Indonesia (2), Thailand (1) and Japan (1) *[see Annex 1]* were selected to participate in a three-month intensive research initiative, funded by the Japan Foundation under the "Grant Program for Intellectual Exchange Conferences 2020".

About IKMAS, UKM

Established on 1 April 1995, the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS) is a Universiti Kebangsaan (National University of) Malaysia (UKM) research centre devoted to multidisciplinary research, post-graduate teaching and other academic activities with a focus on connectivity, inclusive development, identity, nation-building, human security, governance, and international relations.

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INTRODUCTION

The stark reality is that the number of people fleeing political persecution and civil-war is unlikely to decrease in the near future. On-going geopolitical uncertainties, ethnic conflicts and human rights violations occurring in almost all parts of the world make it impossible for many to stay and face the unprecedented risks of exploitations and persecutions at home. These unfortunate segments of society flee to seek asylum and international protection abroad.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated how the international community perceives, acts and reacts to international mobility, in particular, voluntary and/or forced migration. As travel restrictions (both domestic and cross-border) are imposed to combat the pandemic, the opportunities of many to escape and/or recover from the severe consequences of the outbreak are either limited or simply unavailable. To ensure that people affected by the current and future pandemics are provided with appropriate protection, it is high time re-think the question of who are refugees and what protections they are entitled to.

At the end of 2020, there were nearly 80 million refugees worldwide (UNHCR 2020a). It is estimated that about 15% of the world's refugee population are currently hosted by countries in the Asia-Pacific region. In this brief publication, we focus on the refugee situations in four Asia-Pacific countries, namely Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Japan.

There is great disparity between Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand on one hand and Japan on the

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), through the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees 1951 (hereinafter referred to as Refugee Convention 1951), defines a refugee as

"… someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion."

The current refugee definition does not include people who are crossing international borders due to health pandemic such as the COVID-19 outbreak.

other. From the perspective of international legal obligations, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand are non-signatories to Refugee Convention 1951; hence they are not legally obliged to protect refugees in their respective territories. Despite this similarity, existing studies also argue that even between Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, there are slight differences in the way that refugee issues being addressed in these countries (further see Muhammad Riza et al. 2020). Japan, on the other hand, is a party to the convention, and is therefore obligated to establish a legal protection regime and comprehensive asylum system to ensure that refugees' rights, as enshrined in the Refugee Convention 1951, are guaranteed and realized.

Malaysia currently hosts about 170,000 refugees, the most in Southeast Asia (UNHCR 2020a). Thailand and Indonesia host about 90,000 and 14,000 refugees, respectively. As non-state parties to Refugee Convention 1951, not only do Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia not have comprehensive domestic protection frameworks ensuring the refugees' enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms, they also do not officially accord refugee status (Wahab 2017). Consequently, the refugee populations in Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia live in legal limbo – having no or minimal access to basic rights and needs, including the right to formal education, employment, health and other aspects of their livelihoods.

The number of refugees living and seeking protection in Japan is extremely low, compared to Malaysia and Thailand, but Japan is one of the few states in the Asia-Pacific region which is party to Refugee Convention 1951 (Omata 2015). Besides, Japan is among the largest donor countries to the UNHCR's operations globally (Takizawa 2017). As a state party to the convention, the Japanese government has established a national asylum system and mechanism to protect refugee rights in the country.

2. WHAT DOES INTEGRATION MEAN TO REFUGEES AND THE HOSTING SOCIETY?

Integration (or refugee integration) is one of three solutions advocated by the UNHCR; the other two being resettlement in a third country and repatriation to the origin country. Integration may also lead to the naturalization of refugees. However, neither the UNHCR nor Refugee Convention 1951 define refugee integration. This has led to a range of interpretations by hosting and transit countries (including Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Japan), as well as international organizations when addressing and advocating for local refugee integration.

Scholars such as Castles et. al., (2002), Omidvar and Richmond (2003) and Ager, Alastair and Strang (2008) define integration broadly as a process whereby both the receiving communities and the refugees change, and change each other. It is a two-way communication and engagement process between the two parties that eventually change how they perceive, act and react to one another.

For many refugees, integration is simply a way of living which allows them to enter a new space, a new community or country, retain and maintain their belongings and affiliations (UNHCR 2013). Such a process would also allow refugees and the hosting society to share emotion (e.g., through art and social gatherings) and ensure financial security (e.g., through employment).

For Cherti and McNei (2012), refugee integration is literally the everyday functioning of individuals and families, ranging from access to education, employment, housing and other public facilities, leisure, shopping, consumption and childcare.

The refugees' ability to integrate is determined not only by the extent and nature of the protection framework available to them but also their capacities to build successful and fulfilling lives in the host country (Immigration Policy Lab 2019). These capacities encompass their everyday's skills needed to integrate with the hosting society – economically, linguistically, psychologically, socially and politically. The refugee communities' and the host societies' attitudes and beliefs may shape both sides' experiences and interactions and eventually may influence policies and change institutions (Hynie 2018).

3. INTEGRATION CHALLENGES PERSIST EVERYWHERE ELSE

Realizing meaningful and durable integration is a major challenge which has existed for decades and varies from place to place. The integration challenges exist in almost every aspect of the refugees' everyday life, including access to decent employment, education, healthcare, housing, asylum processs and effective legal protection.

Although employment is the most important aspect of refugee integration, challenges and barriers persist, even in countries where refugees are officially recognized and permitted to enter the formal labour market.

Other studies indicate that the refugees' lack of education and educational credentials and limited knowledge of the local language were key factors limiting their capability to compete in the open labour market (Haut 2012).

The lack of social networks and unfamiliarity with institutional job search support services led many refugees to over-rely on institutional networks and community leaders to help them find jobs (Mohseni 2001; Descolonges & Laurens 2008; UNHCR 2013).

While institutional networks and community leaders may help refugees find jobs suited to their individual capabilities and skills sets, these processes involve layers of communication and refugees have to wait longer for responses from prospective employers.

Education and language are other integration issues facing many refugees both in Europe and elsewhere, regardless of the status of the host countries' ratification of the Refugee Convention 1951. In countries where refugee children are given access to formal and governmental educational facilities (e.g., access to government schools), inadequate command of English and/or the local language hindered them from learning and exceling in school (Phelan & Kuol 2005).

In Germany, France, Ireland, Belgium and Sweden (i.e., countries who are party to the Refugee Convention 1951), refugees face far worse employment-related issues than economic migrants.

In Ireland, refugees are found three times more likely to report having experienced discrimination during employment recruitment and at the workplace than local people (O'Connell & McGinnity 2008).

In Sweden, the local people tended to be more xenophobic against refugee communities in times of economic decline and high level of unemployment (Hjerm & Bohman 2012).

Where refugee children mastered the language over time, financial constraints often hinder some of them from continuing their education.

Other studies found that the education and credentials obtained by many refugees in origin and transit countries were not officially recognized in destination countries (Phelan & Kuol 2005) and had minimal impact on chances of employment in destination countries (Kennerberg & Aslund 2010).

Poor language acquisition is often linked to where the refugees originate from. There are often great differences in culture, political and educational systems between origin and destination countries, as exemplified by African refugees settling in many European countries (Beque 2007). Kraler et. al., (2013), however, claims that the barriers to language acquisition are due to long-lasting trauma that negatively impact the refugees' concentration, willpower and motivation to learn.

Social (dis)integration and inclusion (or exclusion) are other barriers to meaningful integration among many refugee communities in destination countries. Some refugee communities have very limited contact and interaction with the host society, which leads to minimal social bridging between refugee and local communities (Ager & Strang 2004). Breem (2011) adds that, with the low level of social interaction, many refugees do not make new friends or have much contact with the locals. Refugees in France, for instance, are typically socially isolated and much less likely to have local family and social connections (Beque

2007). Many refugees tend to interact with other refugee communities rather than the host society (UNHCR 2013).

Refugees often **spent a lot of time in holding centres and community-based transits** upon their first arrival in the destination country. They form connections during this arrival stage and maintain these connections. Some refugee communities begin their social interactions with the local community through sporting and cultural events (Stubnig & Lackner 2007). Such interactions offer refugee communities opportunities to share their norms and traditions, become familiar with local norms and traditions, make friends, and eventually serve as the source for jobs, education and healthcare treatment.

A rigid and lengthy asylum process is another great challenge many refugees, especially the new arrivals, face in destination countries. A lengthy asylum process has severe negative consequences for refugees, ranging from poor mental health and inability to socialize with the host society (UNHCR 2013). Studies also indicate that a lengthy asylum process creates an additional crisis situation for refugees and potentially re-traumatize already traumatized individuals (Fabrik 2011). In Sweden, refugees used to wait about eight months for their asylum applications to be decided. In 2012, the waiting period had been reduced by half, to about four months (Migrationsverket 2012). The asylum seekers' applications may also be denied, after which they often end-up as irregular migrants and face such punishment as deportation.

4. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AS THE GAME CHANGER

The 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development, also known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), is a development framework that relates directly and indirectly to issues around international mobility, whether voluntary movement or forced migration. The development framework guarantees that no one, regardless of nationality or ethnic background, will be left behind, and that the 17 Goals and 169 associated targets will be met for all nations and peoples.

Initially, the SDGs blueprint did not have specific targets for refugees and other displaced persons, rather categorizing them collectively as a vulnerable segment of society requiring particular attention (Zeender 2018). However, after years of negotiation in the post-publication of the SDGs blueprint in 2015, a specific indicator relating to refugees has been included (i.e., Indicator 16.3.3 – proportion of population who are refugees by country of origin). This allows for a greater accountability and global discourse on refugees in the context of sustainable development (Nahmias & Baal 2019).

Since the SDGs' first inception in 2015, initiatives to realize the SDGs, ranging from education, healthcare, environment, business, poverty eradication, agricultural sector and food securi-ty, urbanization and international cooperation have flourished. Numerous levels of governing systems (i.e., international, national and local) have been created to coordinate development planning, efforts and resources and execute the growing SDGs initiatives.

Like other countries, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Japan are committed to implementing and contributing to global efforts to realize the SDGs. Malaysia, for instance, in its voluntary national review of the implementation of the SDGs (2017), stressed that sustainable development has been at the heart of its development approach since the 1970s – with a greater emphasis on eradicating poverty; improving well-being; providing universal access to education; and caring for the environment.

Evidently, Malaysia managed to reduce absolute poverty from 49.3% (1970) to 0.6% (2014); 90% reduction in under-nutrition between 1990 and 2014; and achieved 97.2% and 90% enrolment rates in both primary and secondary education.

Similarly, in the past decades, Thailand, Indonesia and Japan have been able to reduce poverty significantly, decreased maternal mortality and improved access to clean water and sanitation,

and reduced the development gap between rural areas and cities.

Despite these achievements and the continuous proliferation of SDGs initiatives at national and local levels, there are segments of population who have been left behind and have not been fully integrated into the planning and execution of the SDGs initiatives. One of these segments is the refugee community – including children, women, youth, the elderly - in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Japan.

This research initiative aimed at exploring two questions: first, whether the implementation of the SDGs creates, builds on and/or paves the way for stronger refugee integration in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Japan and; second, whether existing refugee activities and livelihood strategies, many of which are related to SDGs – create opportunities for strengthening integration.

Next section will briefly present the overview of refugee situations and the snapshot of their individual contribution covering Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Japan.

5. REFUGEE INTEGRATION AND SDGS: AN OVERVIEW OF PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES IN MALAYSIA, INDONESIA, THAILAND AND JAPAN

5.1 Malaysia

There are around 178,140 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with UNHCR in Malaysia, comprising more than 50 different nationalities (or countries of origin) and ethnic groups, as of August 2020 (UNHCR 2020). The vast majority (over 90 per cent) of the registered refugees and asylum-seekers are from Myanmar, including over 100,000 stateless Rohingyas, about 20,000 Chins, and nearly 30,000 members of various Myanmar ethnic groups.

Despite their high numbers, these refugees face on-going criminalization, arbitrary arrest and detention in Malaysia (Kaur, 2007). Refugees are not officially recognized in Malaysia, making them liable for harsh punishment under its immigration laws (Wake 2016).

Nearly one-third of the registered refugee population in Malaysia are children below the age of 18. However, they are prohibited access to government schools at all levels. Instead, refugee children have access to a range of alternative education programmes run by various NGOs, often in partnership with the UNHCR and refugee community-based organizations (Letchamanan 2013). Many Muslim refugee children (e.g., the Rohingyas), attend religious schools, such as madrasahs, run by faith-based NGOs together with Rohingya community-based organizations.

Thus, these Muslim refugee children can pursue Islamic teaching and primary education at these schools (Wake & Cheung 2016; Palik 2020).

Regarding healthcare issues, refugees with valid UNHCR cards are given access to healthcare treatment at Malaysian government health facilities. Refugees with valid UNHCR cards also enjoy fifty per cent discount from the fee charged to non-citizens at government health facilities, including community clinics (Wahab 2019). While access to hospitalization is possible for registered refugees, their lack of formal employment and household poverty make it difficult when they require hospitalization (Wahab 2018).

With no official recognition of their status in Malaysia, refugees are prohibited from entering the formal labour market (Wahab 2019). Thus, many refugees work informally, undertaking jobs often shunned by the locals. A study found that nearly half (68,021 individuals) of the total registered refugees in Malaysia (in 2019) were employed informally in such sectors as horticulture and agriculture, construction, cleaning, food and retail, manufacturing, hospitality and education (Todd et. al. 2019). The absence of labour rights protection and access to redressal mechanism positions refugees at risk of exploitation and manipulation by unscrupulous individuals and enforcement personnel.

Article 1# (Summary)

In their article titled "Exploring the Concepts of Rohingya Refugee Integration in Peninsular Malaysia", **Balqis Aini Mustafa, Abdul Latiff Ahmad** and **Jamaluddin Aziz** argue that refugee integration is a key topic on the global agenda highlighted in the SDGs, specifically under goal 16, that is, to "promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies. They claim that although the concept of integration is widely used across different research fields, finding consensus as to what integration means is difficult. They refer to integration as a broad-based, dynamic, multidimensional, and two-way adaptation process to a new culture that occurs over time. As Malaysia is a non-state party to the Refugee Convention 1951 and its Protocol 1967, the refugee population in Malaysia, especially the Rohingyas are denied their basic rights. The authors further argue that, while voluntary repatriation is an impossibility, due to the on-going Rakhine State crisis in Myanmar, coupled with slow progress and reduced opportunities of resettlement to a third country, the only durable solution is local integration. By referring to a conceptual framework of integration proposed by Ager and Strang (2008), the authors explore the adoption of the concept of refugee integration, with a specific reference to Rohingya refugees in Malaysia.

Article 2# (Summary)

In his article titled "A Pathway of Education for Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia: Work in Progress?", **Aizat Khairi** explains the important role played by a local NGO, the Peacebuilding Club, in providing alternative education to the Rohingya children in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia (Penang Island). While it is widely acknowledged that the right to education is a basic right of all children, regardless of nationality, refugee children are denied their right to enrol in formal education in Malaysia. The absence of quality education leads to continuous poverty and many other forms of social deprivation facing Rohingya refugees across different generations in Malaysia. He further argues that the role of the Peacebuilding Club extends beyond providing access to alternative education to strengthening ties and relationships between the local and refugee communities. Through its alternative education initiatives, the Peacebuilding Club collaborates with the UNHCR and has established an alternative learning centre known as Penang Peace Learning Centre (PPLC), which provides education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Despite the many challenges NGOs face in fulfilling the educational needs of refugee children in Malaysia, he claims that such efforts are essential and should be deemed progress in terms of their achievement.

Article 3# (Summary)

Aslam Abd. Jalil, in his article titled "Rights at Work for Refugees in Malaysia: Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 8", argues that the absence of a domestic legal protection framework for refugees has led to many institutional barriers to their enjoyment of basic rights in Malaysia, including the right to decent employment. However, the Government of Malaysia has piloted a refugee employment initiative which offers a prospect to introduce the right to employment to the refugee population in Malaysia. Considering the likelihood that the pilot project will be expanded, he stresses that it is important for the Government of Malaysia to first grant the right to legal employment among refugees by amending the existing domestic legal framework. While it is acknowledged that the right to legal employment is key to remedying many social deprivations, Aslam proposes that any effort to realize the refugees' right to decent work should encompass the state, market and refugee relationship, consistent with the concept of refugee economies suggested by Betts et. al. (2016). In his article, Aslam further explains how the concept of refugee economies can be adapted in the context of refugees in Malaysia.

Article 4# (Summary)

In his article titled "A Pathway of Education for Rohingya Refugees in Malaysia: Work in Progress?", **Aizat Khairi** explains the important role played by a local NGO, the Peacebuilding Club, in providing alternative education to the Rohingya children in the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia (Penang Island). While it is widely acknowledged that the right to education is a basic right of all children, regardless of nationality, refugee children are denied their right to enrol in formal education in Malaysia. The absence of quality education leads to continuous poverty and many other forms of social deprivation facing Rohingya refugees across different generations in Malaysia. He further argues that the role of the Peacebuilding Club extends beyond providing access to alternative education to strengthening ties and relationships between the local and refugee communities. Through its alternative education initiatives, the Peacebuilding Club collaborates with the UNHCR and has established an alternative learning centre known as Penang Peace Learning Centre (PPLC), which provides education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Despite the many challenges NGOs face in fulfilling the educational needs of refugee children in Malaysia, he claims that such efforts are essential and should be deemed progress in terms of their achievement.

5.2 Indonesia

On the 31st of December 2016, the Government of Indonesia established a national umbrella regulation for the protection of refugees based on humanitarian grounds, although Indonesia is not a state party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its Protocol 1967. Known as Presidential Regulation No. 2016/125 concerning the Treatment of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Indonesia, the umbrella regulation provides guidance, standards and a unified approach by various Indonesian government agencies working on refugee issues.

Despite the implementation of this umbrella regulation, UNHCR remains the key institution in safe-guarding the rights and well-being of the refugee population in Indonesia. As of July 2020, in Indonesia, there were nearly 14,000 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with the UNHCR (UNHCR 2020b). Due to its strategic location and consistent adherence to the principle of non-refoulement, Indonesia is viewed as a transit country by many refugees reaching out to Australia and New Zealand (Ali 2016; Afriansyah and Zulfa 2018).

Article #5 (Summary)

In his article titled "Integration through Schooling Refugee Children in Indonesia: Between Legality, Opportunity, and Intricacy", **Dio Herdiawan Tobing** argues that, despite being the third largest refugee hosting country in the Southeast Asian region, Indonesia has consistently pursued a policy of accommodation, offering temporary settlement (rather than permanent residence) to refugee communities. The umbrella regulation does not offer such substantive solutions as local integration. However, while Indonesia does not have a comprehensive refugee legal protection framework, it has taken a progressive step in realizing refugee rights, notably, providing refugee children in the country with the right to education.

Unlike Malaysia and Thailand, Indonesia allows the school-age refugee children to enrol for formal education in government schools. At the of end 2019, there were 1,711 refugee children enrolled in government schools in seven cities across Indonesia, namely Medan, Tangerang, Makassar, Pekanbaru, Batam, Semarang, and Kupang. The Indonesian Ministry of Education has actively partnered with UNHCR Indonesia and NGOs to facilitate the children's access to Indonesian schools (Mautanha 2017; IOM 2018). In his article, Dio Herdiawan discusses the factors that influenced the Indonesian government in allowing refugee children access to the Indonesian education system and whether such access has contributed to better integration with host communities in the country. He further explains the dynamics of integrating refugee children into local Indonesian schools, as well as the limits and possibilities of local integration from institutional and societal perspectives.

Article #6 (Summary)

While efforts to facilitate refugee children's access to education in major Indonesian cities are on-going, refugees, especially the Rohingyas, continue to arrive on the shores of Indonesia's westernmost province, namely Aceh. **Muhammad Riza**, in his article titled "The Rohingya refugees in Aceh, Indonesia: The Challenges and Chances of De Facto Local Integration", notes that between 2009 and 2020, there have been continual waves of Rohingya refugees arriving in Aceh province. Unlike many places where the Rohingyas have been rejected or are unwelcomed, Aceh has warmly welcomed the Rohingyas, despite the Indonesian government's reluctance to ratify the 1951 Refugee Convention. Questions remain as to whether the welcome is sustainable or whether there are opportunities for institutionalized or long-term local integration.

By considering the three dimensions of local integration namely legal, economic and social spheres, Muhammad Riza discusses whether Aceh should be viewed merely as temporary sanctuary or a place for medium or long-term integration. He also discusses the present challenges facing the Rohingya refugees already in Aceh, particularly from the legal perspective, their participation in the local economy and social dynamics. On a positive note, he points out that local wisdoms (e.g., sea customary law), the culture of welcoming guests, Islamic solidarity and shared feelings as victims of conflict may serve as a very constructive and meaningful framework for policy-making that may eventually shape the Indonesian government's policies for local integration in the future. Finally, he argues that there is great opportunity to create de facto local integration of Rohingya refugees in Indonesia.

5.3 Thailand

Thailand hosts the second largest number of refugees in the Southeast Asian region. As of August 2020, there were nearly 100,000 refugees and asylum-seekers registered with the UNHCR throughout the country, the majority of which are members of various ethnic groups from Myanmar (UNHCR 2020c). The vast majority of Myanmar refugees, such as Karen and Karenni, live in nine refugee camps in four provinces along the Thai-Myanmar border. There are also about 5,000 refugees of some 40 nationalities settled temporarily in urban settings, mostly in Bangkok, where a significant number has lived in the city centre for more than five years (UNHCR 2020c). As a non-state party to Refugee Convention 1951 and its Protocol 1967, Thailand does not have a domestic legal protection framework for refugees, making their integration into Thai society a highly complex process.

Regarding refugees living in Thai cities, the Thai Government has been consistently reluctant to allow any refugee groups to either enter into formal job market or undertaking any forms of income-generating activities. This adds to the difficulties faced by refugees living in such urban centres as Bangkok, who only receive minimal humanitarian assistance provided by the UN-HCR and local NGOs. In December 2019, the Thai Government approved the establishment of a national screening mechanism to distinguish between people who need international protection and those who do not. This screening mechanism is arguably the first in the region, and it is expected to increase the protection space of many refugees and their access to social services, including those who have settled temporarily in Bangkok.

Article #7 (Summary)

In his article titled "Barriers and Bridges: Urban Refugees and Labor Market Integration in Thailand", **Bhanubhatra Jittiang** examines an aspect of local integration among urban refugees in Bangkok, specifically their access to Thai labour market. Like Malaysia and Indonesia, refugees in Thailand, either within or outside refugee camps, are prohibited to formal labour market. However, Bhanubhatra claims that the urban refugees' access to employment and income-generating activities is fundamental to their survival. However, Bhanubhatra argues that the Thai Government's policies (i.e., prohibition of formal employment among refugees), "pull factor" and "burden" discourses, and the refugees' relationships with the locals prevent the refugees' integration into the labour market. He also argues that these challenges and barriers further increase the vulnerability of refugees, as they allow unscrupulous employers to exploit the labour of forcibly displaced persons.

The creation of the national screening mechanism in 2019, continuous advocacy by refugee organizations and the refugees' skill sets serve as enabling factors that can potentially pave the way for the integration of refugees into the labour market in urban Bangkok. As Thai society is fast becoming an aging society, Bhanubhatra stresses that it is time to consider the need and potential of integrating the already available pool of talents among the refugee communities into the formal labour market in urban Bangkok.

5.4 Japan

Japan, unlike Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, is a state party to the Refugee Convention 1951 and its Protocol 1967. Thus, Japan has established a national asylum system to adjudicate asylum applications submitted to any of its immigration offices under the Ministry of Justice. The Japanese Government is also among the larger donors to the UNHCR (Omata 2015). However, the Japanese Government faces criticism from the international community for its extremely low rate of refugee acceptance, raising the critical question of whether the Japanese Government has adequately fulfilled its obligations under the Refugee Convention 1951 and its Protocol 1967. Since the Japanese Government ratified the Convention in 1982, it has approved only about 700 refugee applications, as of 2017 (Takizawa 2017).

Article #8 (Summary)

There have been consistent efforts by various Japanese civil society organizations to reform the Japanese asylum system. However, these efforts have not been adequate to influence Japanese policy makers' perceptions of refugees (Dean & Nagashima 2007; Junichi 2016). The Japanese Government has remained reluctant to change. But, while the asylum system in Japan has remained conservative, there are other aspects of integration which offer possibilities, such as education. In his article titled "Social Integration and Refugee Higher Education Program (RHEP) in Japan", **Abraha Desale Tesfamariam** discusses the on-going efforts led by several Japanese higher learning institutions in partnership with the UNHCR to facilitate refugees' access to tertiary education. About 13 Japanese universities are providing selected refugees with the opportunity to enrol in certain programs with financial support. Abraha argues that the current tertiary education initiative is timely as it can serve as the starting point for constructive engagement between the refugee community and Japanese society. Historically, Japanese society was viewed as a closed society and it remains so today. Abraha argues that this higher learning education initiative is expected to improve the way the Japanese values the presence of many refugee communities in the country.

6. LESSONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The aspects of refugee integration discussed in this brief publication are access to employment, education, health, livelihood, social norms and the role of civil society in providing humanitarian assistance. These aspects of refugee integration are also commonly debated in other countries beyond the scope of this publication (see Ager, Alastair and Strang 2008).

In this concluding section, we aim to draw several lessons from the authors' contributions and relate them to on-going SDGs-related initiatives. We examine the symbiotic relationship between refugee integration and implementation of SDGs, with the aim to produce further academic inquiries for future research.

It is important to note that lessons derived from the authors' contributions may be specific to their respective research context (i.e., country-specific). However, they may still be useful to generate academic inquiries in other refugee contexts (i.e., in other countries) beyond the scope of this book.

In the Introduction, we explained the different contexts of refugee integration and refugee protection regimes in the four countries that are the focus of our publication. We explained how a country such as Japan, a state party to the Refugee Convention 1951 which has implemented its own asylum system, but has a low refugee acceptance rate in the past two to three decades. However, when it comes to the broad aspects of integration such as employment, health and education, the issues and challenges are almost identical. Distrust, negative perceptions of the refugees' ability to contribute meaningfully to the domestic economy, and of refugees being risks to public health and national security continue to exist in all four countries. Refugees are still viewed as a passive, highly dependent on humanitarian aid, unskilled, uneducated and culturally conservative.

Lesson #1

The COVID-19 outbreak has further exacerbated this negative narrative, hampering efforts to continue building trust and solidarity between the refugee communities and the host societies. This leads to the first lesson that can be drawn from this publication – the importance of strengthening social connections between refugee communities and the host society. In Malaysia and Indonesia, for instance, prior to the COVID-19 outbreak – refugee communities received tangible and intangible social support from the host communities.

Similarly, public perceptions and attitudes towards refugee communities were positive and encouraging. The COVID-19 outbreak and the accompanying economic downturn changed this positive narrative, spreading stigma and distrust fast among the locals towards the refugee communities.

In the future, as countries enter the COVID-19 recovery era, questions arise as to what policy makers and humanitarian actors can do to restore the trust and solidarity between refugee communities and host societies, and how SDG-related initiatives can be leveraged to strengthen social connections between the two?

Scholars such as Ager and Strang (2020) have highlighted that, in addition to tangible support in the form of education, health, employment and public housing, social connection is another important aspect of refugee integration. Stronger social connections can shape public opinion, attitudes towards and acceptance of the refugee communities, all of which can potentially lead to supportive policy making.

Lesson #2

Second, countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand should ratify the Refugee Convention 1951 and its Protocol 1967. Though doing so may raise more questions than answers for these governments, it provides assurance that the countries will establish a domestic refugee protection regime.

In this publication, however, the authors explained how, despite being non-state parties to the convention, countries can still provide refugee communities with a certain degree of protection. Thailand, for example, established a national screening mechanism to determine individuals who require international protection. In Indonesia, refugee children can still enrol in government schools. The Malaysian government has initiated an employment scheme in selected sectors of the economy for refugees.

Thus, while a long-term solution (e.g., ratification of convention) may not be feasible in the near future, governments can initiate a range of intermediate measures. Several questions require further discussion.

- First, how can these intermediate measures (e.g., refugee access to government schools in certain provinces in Indonesia) be scaled-up across the country? This is to ensure that all refugee children will have access to formal education across the country.

- Second, how can these measures (e.g., government-initiated employment scheme for Rohingya refugees in Malaysia) be extended to cover other refugee populations?

- Third, how can civil society, with its available resources and expertise, play a role in the implementation of the national screening mechanism in Thailand?

The growing efforts to localizing SDGs initiatives in Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand (e.g., decent employment under SDG Goal 8) can help addressing these gaps.

Lesson #3

We now turn to the aspects of partnership and cooperation (SDG Goal 16) specifically, as these are key components to ensure that implementation of the SDGs is truly inclusive. In this publication, several authors have highlighted the importance of collaboration and partnership among the refugee communities, civil society, government agencies and such international organizations as UNHCR.

These collaborations already occur in such aspects of refugee integration as co-managing and co-funding of refugee learning centres, providing healthcare treatments, co-organizing community building programmes, etc. While some collaborations have been sustainable for a significant number of years, others had to stop due to lack of support, including funds.

The authors highlighted that, in different situations in Malaysia and Thailand, the refugees' community-based organizations received minimal or no financial support at all to help run and maintain various alternative learning centres for refugee children. When the parents of refugee children were unable to pay the school fees, they stopped sending their children to the alternative learning centres, risking more refugee children dropping out from the school and entering informal employment at an early age. This raises many critical questions.

- First, how can local NGOs and refugees' community-based organization sustain their educational programmes for refugee children?

- Second, what model of collaboration should local NGOs and refugees' community-based organizations emulate to continuously receive financial and non-financial support, while developing financial independence and sustainability?

- Third, how do we measure the impact of the educational programmes delivered by the NGOs and refugees' community-based organizations?

- Fourth, how can the private sector play a role in providing financial and non-financial support to many educational, health and employment-related programmes for refugees?

There are no easy answers to these questions but collaboration and partnership may help in building resilience and assuring sustainability.

Lesson #4

Next, local and international NGOs in Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand are offering more social intervention and humanitarian aid programmes on various aspects of refugee protection and welfare. In Malaysia, the authors highlighted the availability of numerous humanitarian programmes focused on providing aid and services to selected groups of refugees, such as Pales-

tinian, Rohingya and Syrian refugees and these programmes are located in such states as Kuala Lumpur and Selangor. Very little efforts have been made to reach out to tens of thousands of other refugee communities (e.g., Pakistani refugees), including those living in rural and semi-urban areas.

In addition, a significant number of humanitarian programmes, whether run by local NGOs or in partnership with international organizations, focus on delivering food and providing temporary shelter, healthcare and education. Only a handful of civil society actors provide legal services or help refugee communities access the legal system.

The authors also highlighted that many refugees in Malaysia and Thailand are unable to obtain legal advice and representation and access to mechanisms to resolve grievances. There is a great need to diversify the type of humanitarian work being done and services being provided to refugees.

Future research should assess the refugees' current humanitarian needs and services, taking into account gender (i.e., refugee women may have different needs from refugee men or children); strata (i.e., refugees living in urban areas may have different needs from those living in rural areas); and finding ways to ensure that refugees participate more in the design and implementation of the humanitarian aid.

Lesson #5

Fifth, in Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, refugee resettlement to third countries in the past few years has been relatively low. The COVID-19 outbreak has made it even worse. Countries are unlikely to open their borders during the course of the pandemic to allow new refugees to enter their territory under a resettlement programme.

The prospect for resettlement in the post-COVID-19 years is uncertain as it depends significantly on geopolitics and the domestic political situations in such countries as the United States of America. With little prospect of resettlement in the coming years and repatriation to refugees' countries of origin (e.g., Myanmar) highly undesirable, many refugee communities in Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand are likely to remain for a significant period. How then would Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, which view themselves as transit countries, react to these developments, and what kind of local integration model can be introduced to mediate this challenging "protracted refugee situation"?

The authors have highlighted, in the case of Indonesia (Aceh province) for example, local and cultural values have triggered greater acceptance that has, in turn, greatly influenced the policy-making space, especially at the local administrative level. These cultural values include the local Acehnese tradition of "welcoming guests", a "custom of sea commander", and spirit of "Islamic solidarity" and "Muslim brotherhood".

As to the question of "what kind of a local integration model" may be introduced, it is also important to relate the model of integration to the cultural values and making the connections more tangible to refugee communities and host societies alike. A sense of belonging and urgency must be expressed clearly, not only as the outcome but also in the design of the local integration model.

Lesson #6

Finally, in the context of a more complex societal landscape, for example, the homogenous population in Japan, existing cultural values may not be amenable easy acceptance of outsiders such as refugee communities into the host society. What more if the vast majority of refugee communities in Japan have different cultures, belief systems, ethnicities, languages and educational backgrounds?

In this brief publication, we have highlighted the importance of education, particularly at the tertiary level, to narrow the gaps and provide opportunities for refugee youths to learn and obtain exposure to the host society, and vice versa. This is made possible when refuges are permitted to enrol in selected institutions of higher learning in Japan.

Other questions worthy of further research are:

- Who are the refugees who have benefited from Japanese tertiary education programmes (e.g., their nationality, gender, etc.)?

- What courses were available to them and did these courses suit the students' interests?

- What were their employment prospects (i.e., decent employment according to SDG Goal 8) after graduation?

- How do we measure the social impact (e.g., social mobility, poverty alleviation, local integration, etc.) of the enrolment of these students in these programs?

Additional data and information are required to facilitate more constructive discourse as we envision the development of a robust and inclusive local integration model, not only in Japan, but also in other countries.

Concluding Remarks

We conclude by returning to the discussion raised earlier in the publication, namely the challenge around defining refugee integration and relating it to the localizing of SDGs. At the global level, while there is no clear definition of what refugee integration means, it has been interpreted broadly as a two-way engagement process where both refugee communities and host societies change, influence and interact with one another, across the 17 goals of SDGs.

Such a process may occur naturally as when both communities interact their everyday lives, but it may also be institutionalized through government intervention. From experiences in Ma-

laysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Japan, we can see a variety of formal and informal models of refugee integration and SDGs such as education, employment, health, housing, humanitarian intervention and the role of civil society to fulfil the governance gaps in refugee protection regime.

There is no one-size-fits-all model that is replicable across different country situations. Despite this development, locally relevant and sensible efforts to define refugee integration must continue. It is important that the evolution of refugee integration interpretation should move towards creating a model of integration with a clear set of attributes. This is particularly crucial to ensure that refugee integration and its model(s) can be continuously monitored, measured and scrutinized for improvement.

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ANNEX 1 - YOUNG SCHOLARS' SHORT BIOGRAPHY

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ANNEX 1 - YOUNG SCHOLARS' SHORT BIOGRAPHY

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