

Meeting Report: “Leading the Way: Refugee Voices in Legal Protection and Empowerment – ARPR Research Report Launch”

Advancing Refugee Protection and Promoting Accountability in Southeast Asia through Legal Empowerment and Refugee Leadership (ARPR)

7 November 2025 at Novotel Bangkok on Siam Square, Bangkok, Thailand

Keynote Speech by H.E. Asst. Prof. Dr. Bhanubhatra Jittiang, Representative of Thailand to the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR)

- Emphasized on the need to move beyond traditional camp-based models of protection toward strategies focused on economic inclusion and legal empowerment. Current approaches rely heavily on providing access to basic services, but the strategic goal is shifting to mechanisms that support self-reliance, such as work permits and promoting legal education and awareness. The overall challenge in the region is the fragmented response to displacement, migration, and trafficking, which requires a cohesive, rights-based approach.
- The current regional governance structure, particularly through AICHR (ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights), lacks a comprehensive framework for refugee protection. This is compounded by ASEAN's strong adherence to principles of sovereignty and non-interference, often resulting in systems that only allow for temporary stay and rely on *de facto* protection driven by diplomacy and humanitarian efforts. Critically, only the Philippines and Cambodia are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. To strengthen protection, the focus must shift from relying on humanitarian aid to upholding human rights, which means transforming emergency response into a long-term investment that views refugees as "partners" in a new social contract. However, the shrinking humanitarian space and the need for support for local organizations remain major concerns.
- In Thailand, which hosts the region's largest caseload, refugees are legally excluded from essential services like education and healthcare, and the protection process is dominated by security agencies. The primary challenge here is to formalize the existing uncertainty by creating a certain legal pathway in designated sectors. The recommendation is to transition from *ad hoc* support to formal regulation to ensure fairness and sustainability in economic participation.
- In Indonesia, the response is managed via a formal Presidential Regulation (RSO) that emphasizes local coordination and engagement. Moving forward, a route-based approach is necessary, focusing on issues beyond simple displacement to include protracted displacement, mixed migration, and climate displacement. All efforts require

evidence-based research to bridge the gap between national frameworks and grassroots realities.

- The regional advocacy strategy must recognize that ASEAN's non-interference policy allows issues like trafficking to affect the entire region, proving the need for a collective rights-based response. The most effective entry point for change is the national government level. Advocates must provide compelling evidence of "the cost of not doing it" to convince governments of the necessity for action. This is achieved by strengthening Community-Based Organization (CBOs) on the ground before escalating advocacy to the regional level.

Introduction to ARPR Project

- The project is guided by the core principle of legal empowerment: that access to protection and justice will increase when communities *know the law, use the law, and shape the law*. It applies a participatory, mixed-method research design led by refugees themselves, including paralegals and members of the Refugee-Led Network (RLN). The research was carried out in partnership with the Refugee and Asylum seekers Information Centre (RAIC) in Indonesia, Asylum Access Malaysia (AAM), Asylum Access Thailand (AAT), and the Nelson Mandela Center for Conflict Resolution, Atrocity Prevention, and Human Security at the Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University.
- The project's main objectives are to analyze existing laws and protection mechanisms, evaluate the effectiveness of legal empowerment programs in enabling refugees to know, use and shape laws, and compare experiences across three countries to inform regional protection strategies.

Research Report Launch Presentation

- The study was framed around three pillars: knowing the laws, using the laws, and shaping the laws. It adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, which emphasized collective empowerment, teamwork, and reflection throughout the three-year project cycle.
- The interventions included capacity building, engaging co-researchers, co-designing research tools, conducting community-led data collection, collaborative analysis, and participatory monitoring and evaluation. Through this process, empowerment materials and awareness workshops were developed to strengthen refugee-led initiatives.
- In Thailand, refugee representatives regularly collaborated using consistent tools to track legal empowerment outcomes. Refugees began to use legal knowledge in multiple roles, as information providers, referral agents, and cultural or linguistic brokers, marking a

shift from being passive legal subjects to becoming active advocates in their communities. This transformation has enhanced their confidence and ability to engage with authorities, resolve disputes, and contribute to community-led advocacy. Legal literacy has significantly improved, especially among women and youth, leading to greater participation in decision-making and stronger social networks.

- In Indonesia, expert-led workshops were held in Jakarta and Bogor. Refugees who participated became active community agents, assisting others in navigating local systems, including the presidential regulation that allows temporary stay. The approach promoted women's leadership, improved access to local services, and encouraged safe engagement with authorities through structured paralegal and awareness training.
- In Malaysia, however, the research was constrained due to challenges in securing the approvals needed to conduct primary research. As a result, the study relied solely on secondary data. Despite these limitations, refugee communities continued to organize legal awareness sessions and peer-to-peer support networks, demonstrating remarkable resilience and adaptability in the face of restrictive policies.
- Overall, across the three countries, the research confirmed that refugee-led legal empowerment fosters greater trust, community resilience, and rights awareness. It provides a foundation for collective advocacy, gender inclusion, and stronger collaboration between refugee communities, civil society, and policymakers in advancing protection across Southeast Asia.

Panel Discussion: Challenges and Successes in Legal Empowerment

- The panel discussion highlighted key challenges and successes from across the three countries. Common challenges included safety and security threats from immigration raids, limited digital literacy which hindered online workshops, and language barriers that complicated community engagement. The emotional toll of frequent refugee status determination (RSD) rejections was also noted, particularly on paralegals who support affected individuals.
- Despite these challenges, there were significant successes. Refugee communities demonstrated increased confidence, trust, and leadership. Many shifted from dependency toward self-empowerment, leading more than 26 refugee-designed legal empowerment workshops in Malaysia alone. These efforts resulted in tangible outcomes such as workplace dispute resolutions, improved birth registration, and stronger community advocacy. Additionally, economic inclusion research revealed that allowing refugees to work legally could bring major benefits to both host economies and refugee well-being.

Legal Empowerment in Indonesia (RAIC)

- RAIC shared results from its 2024 intervention-based data collection activities in Jakarta and Bogor. These included training programs, social media campaigns, and stakeholder engagement activities.
- The initiatives successfully promoted women’s leadership and strengthened the capacity of the “G5 team” of refugee advocates. Participants reported gains in public speaking, confidence, and advocacy skills. Engagement with local police helped build trust and improved reporting mechanisms for refugees to access protection and services safely.

Legal Empowerment in Malaysia (AAM)

- Malaysia, hosting the largest refugee population in ASEAN, predominantly from Myanmar, including large numbers of Rohingya, faces ongoing challenges due to its non-signatory status to the 1951 Refugee Convention. UNHCR continues to operate without a formal legal framework. Refugees face risks of arrest, lack of formal work rights, reported cases of corruption, and legal ambiguity.
- AAM presented findings from its *Work Rights Report* in collaboration with APRRN, revealing that 137,000 of Malaysia’s 2 million foreign workers are refugees, many working informally. The report documented 942 cases of workplace disputes and called for greater refugee participation in policymaking. Advocacy is ongoing concerning the government’s new DPP registration system, which may open pathways to limited work rights. The presentation emphasized community-led engagement and local collaboration to mitigate frequent raids and harassment.

Legal Literacy and Community Mobilization in Thailand (Paralegals)

- In Thailand, the Paralegal project established by AAT in 2017 is now serving diverse communities such as Pakistani Ahmadiyya, Pakistan Christian, Arabic, Sri-Lanka, Afghan, Regional Africa, Vietnamese Jarai, Vietnamese Ede, and Hmong communities. The project aims to provide access to justice and legal empowerment to the community of asylum seekers and refugees in Bangkok. A paralegal at AAT is usually a refugee from the community itself who uses their knowledge of local culture and context, along with legal skills and a passion for justice, to support, educate, and advocate for fellow community members;
- Paralegals at AAT play a critical role in enhancing access to justice and protection for refugee communities. They facilitate legal clinics (group workshops for communities, usually on Thai laws) using participatory approaches, provide accurate legal and protection information, and strengthen community engagement. Paralegals also identify and refer vulnerable individuals to AAT or relevant service providers, manage

administrative and reporting tasks, and update community mapping data. As trusted community focal points, they raise awareness on protection issues, including SGBV and child protection, and accompany clients to AAT or partner organizations when needed, ensuring that AAT's interventions remain responsive and effective;

- The paralegal team faced several challenges in delivering legal support, including language barriers, limited participant engagement, security risks for refugees, and funding constraints. The shift to online legal clinics addressed safety concerns but introduced issues such as unstable internet and digital access. High volumes of urgent cases also required a rapid response;
- Despite the challenges, the paralegal team is diligently working to sustain the project activities by running legal clinics independently while also assisting with various tasks. We continue to explore new ways to support one another in our mission to assist asylum seekers and refugees, ensuring the program remains functional despite limited resources and personnel, as well as strengthening partnerships, improving mutual understanding, and building trust between communities and supporting organizations.

Refugee-Led Advocacy in Thailand (RLN)

- RLN, founded by refugees in Bangkok, presented its work promoting self-advocacy and leadership among forcibly displaced persons. RLN's vision is to ensure that refugees have access to basic human rights, while its mission focuses on advocacy, empowerment, and community capacity building.
- RLN's activities include training on advocacy, child protection, communication, cultural competency, public speaking, and facilitation. It also organizes events to raise awareness, foster partnerships, and improve relations between refugees and host communities. The network has produced advocacy videos on MOU-ATD and is currently developing a storytelling video to promote refugee protection and advocate for unrestricted access to National Screening Mechanism (NSM). . RLN also continues to amplify refugee voices through different forums and events working in collaboration with partners like AAT, Chulalongkorn University, Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), and PILnet. These initiatives have enhanced refugee leadership, community engagement, and overall advocacy capacity.
- Nonetheless, RLN continues to face challenges such as safety risks, legal insecurity, staff turnover, limited facilities, and funding constraints.
- Upcoming activities include participation in World Children's Day on 19 November and International Human Rights Day on 20 December, with plans to expand partnerships and long-term engagement.

Reflection and Q&A

- Funding challenges were a recurring concern, with participants noting shrinking humanitarian space due to global funding cuts and the need to identify new donors and allocate resources strategically. Regarding Thailand’s National Screening Mechanism (NSM), the discussion emphasized the importance of ensuring that the framework remains adaptable to evolving situations, such as ongoing displacement from Myanmar. Participants underscored the necessity of government ownership, language accessibility, and policy flexibility for the NSM to be effective in the long term.
- An online participant raised questions about the inclusion of Sri Lankan refugees and newly arrived asylum seekers in ongoing programs, to which AAT clarified that it provides legal services to refugees and asylum seekers of all nationalities residing in urban settings. Others inquired about AAT’s continued work on “Know, Use, and Shape the Law”, to which AAT responded that legal empowerment will remain central to its approach despite reduced capacity.
- Participants also discussed media portrayals of refugees and the lack of reliable government data on crimes involving refugees and asylum seekers in Thailand and Indonesia. It was noted that in the absence of such data, misleading or sensationalized reporting can reinforce negative stereotypes and nationalist narratives.
- Finally, regional partner, APRRN, expressed interest in fostering collaboration among refugee paralegals and refugee-led organizations across countries to share good practices and strengthen regional networks for legal empowerment.