

# Uplifting Refugee's Capacity Through Refugees-Based NGO in Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experiences of refugees-based NGO in managing, advocating and promoting refugee's capacity in the host country. The main objective of this preliminary study is to analyze how this NGO plays a pivotal role in empowering refugees group to survive in the host country local setting. An in-depth interview with one refugee-based NGO that working with Rohingya refugees showed that there are many forms of exertion were introduced include formal schools for children, entrepreneurship program, job preparation workshop and mutual agreement with industry on job availability. However, these strategies face many challenges in terms of attitude, cultural barrier, living tradition that uprooted the refugee's community. This study recommends to strengthening these challenges through Chaskin's community capacity concept in terms of skills, knowledge and resources, nature of social relations, civic participation and value system to uplift refugee's capacity in society that currently experience local constraint namely the absence of government support, local community stigma towards refugees and lack of coordinated strategies among refugees-based NGOs. This strategy has a potential to eradicate more social problems that might derived from unattended refugee community includes health-risks, harassment, discrimination, life-insecurity, psychological disorder, urban poor and crime.

**Keywords:** *Refugees, Community, Country, NGOs, Government*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia hosts many inauspicious people seeking safety in neighboring countries. Based on [1] statistics, there are 178,990 refugees registered with UNCHR in Malaysia includes 101,010 Rohingyas the biggest refugee ethnic from Myanmar. On top of that, Malaysia shelter 24,900 refugees from other countries consist of Pakistan (6,660), Yemen (3,680), Somalia (3,290), Iraq (3,290), Palestinians (790) and from other countries [2] while a significant number of refugees remain unregistered.

Malaysia is among 43 countries that has not ratified the Status of Refugees of United Nations Convention 1951, to refrain from commitment that forbids a host country from returning a refugee to the home country. This convention binds the host country to the rights and provisions for refugees to work, to provide shelter, and to offer formal education. In addition, the host country subject to provide refugee rights should be extended the longer refugees are forced to stay in the host country, providing good incentives for resettlement in another countries and protection for integration into the host country

community; if solutions for resettlement impossible to be implemented. As Malaysia has yet ratified this convention, there are many challenges faced by the refugee population. These include challenges in building relationships within the community, without legal identification in the host country and considered by the authorities to be illegal immigrants that potentially to arrest, detention and deportation. Moreover, this status becomes the major obstacle to refugees as they were denied the right to work legally, access healthcare and formal education to obtain qualifications. As they have already existed in the host country and with the absence of government function, the NGO plays an explicit role.

Over twenty years, numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been established in Malaysia to support the predicament of refugees in Malaysia particularly for collective advocacy and activism. NGOs are the primary tools used by refugees to fight for the safety and protection of their rights to basic needs such as education and health services [3]. The role of refugee-based NGOs can be understood in relation to UNHCR function. UNHCR equips NGOs that focus on refugees and play an important role in

their work. This task corresponds to two categories of UNHCR operations: protection and programming. The traditional legal framework gives UNHCR the right to protect refugee rights for security, education, employment, health care, and other provisions [3].

UNHCR predominantly the well-known and influential formal institution in refugees' life, act as the gatekeeper to the refugees in terms of registration and resettlement, and provide significant supports on financial, livelihoods, protection and health [4]. However, UNHCR confront financial and other resource constraints. In this regard, NGOs have been seen as potential stakeholders to become central organizations between UNHCR and state governments, community leaders, the private sector or independent donors to increase efforts to building capacity within the refugee community.

In spite of that, there are limited references about how refugee-based NGOs are contributing to uplift refugee's capacity in terms of everyday survivor. Thus, this paper seeks to explain what kind of services refugees-based NGOs predominantly provide to this particular group. Furthermore, this paper explores how those services have been designed and reach to refugees, what are the challenges, and how those challenges can be overcome. Applying community capacity concept from [5], this paper highlights further strategies in uplifting refugees living conditions based on NGOs involvement.

## **1.1. Literature Review**

### *1.1.1. The Initiation of Refugees-Based NGOs In Malaysia*

The Rohingya people of Myanmar (known as Burma before 1989) were deprived of citizenship in 1982, as they could not qualify to prove their ancestors settled in Burma before 1823, and now make up one in seven of the global population of stateless people [6]. In 1978, when the government announced that the Rohingya in Rakhine State were not included as ethnic Myanmar minorities, followed by an inter-agency inspection team had taken Rohingya identification documents [7]. As a result, currently there are about 1.1 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh [8]. Myanmar has refused international demand for Rohingya repatriation, and planted landmines along the Bangladesh border that create the Rohingya evacuation as the massive emigration of the 21st century. Rohingya migration is certainly to prolong if Myanmar, Bangladesh or India, circumvent to resolve the Rohingya identity problem.

Importantly, according to [9] while earlier Rohingya immigrants predominantly were men, (following the 2012 violence) the influx of Rohingya women began to settle in Malaysia as they became targeted at oppression in Myanmar. UNHCR estimates that 10% of the passengers on board are reported to be women [10], while Equal Rights Trust has reported that, in 2012, up to 15% of Rohingya immigrants in Malaysia were women and children [9]. Many factors contribute for the increasing number of Rohingya migrants traveling to Malaysia include fleeing to seek safe places, reuniting with husbands who have left Myanmar earlier than them and having marriages arranged by their parents or future husbands who finance for their migration travel to Malaysia [9]. Besides, Malaysia has been viewed on faith-based perspective as Islam is official religion of the country. Moreover, well-established Rohingya community in prominent urban centers, and informal job opportunities [9],[11] attract more Rohingya to arrive in Malaysia.

On 20 May 2015, after a series of international pressures and media scrutiny due to unwelcomed situation towards refugees attempt to entering their sea borders, the three governments of Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand issued a joint statement providing temporary shelter to refugees, provided the international community resides or repatriates them in one year [12]. Clearly, with the Malaysian government not guaranteeing protection against refugees, and the volatile situation of refugees, local NGOs are taking the initiative to help refugees fleeing to Malaysia. Malaysia labelled as very strict and unfriendly to non-governmental organizations [4]. The restrictions limit the attention of NGOs to help the refugee community. Up to date, almost half from twenty organizations in Malaysia actively represent refugee affairs. Most of the NGOs dedicate their operational for refugees, lobbying and offer services to public including refugees such as *SUARAM*, *Tenaganita* and, *Health Equity Initiatives* (HEI) provides medical care and training to thousands of refugees [3].

The vast majority of refugees in Malaysia do not receive official assistance [13]. Although assistance is limited to refugees in Malaysia, the Malaysian government expects the needs of refugees to be met by the international community [14]. Instead of UNHCR and NGOs, through informal social networks, Rohingya refugees have supported each other via refugee-run community based organizations (CBOs) [3]. CBO is not registered with the authorities and operating without formal support, funded by membership fees, personal contributions from Malaysians and several project-based UNHCR funds.

### *1.1.2. The Concept of Community Capacity*

This paper encapsulates community capacity as a mechanism to uplift refugee's livelihood within a range of NGOs assistance. The term capacity indicates the idea of containing (holding, storing) and the idea of ability (thought, action). Once applied to society, the idea implies the existence of a certain ability, faculty, or power within it to do something. This capability may have affects some aspects of the functioning of society, but in the context of the community buildings are all related to ways to help promote or maintain the well-being of society and its components; from individuals to the environment. Community capacity defines as "working" communities; it is what makes a functioning community work well. In other words, community capacity determines by the emerging function and interaction of neighbourhood and the larger systems of the society [15].

Community capacity has prompted by foundations, government agencies, and various nonprofit and academic institutions to identify and measure relevant factors. In this vein, although the government does not provide other structural assistance and support to the refugees, it does, in a sense, 'compromise' the existence of certain groups in society. This can be seen by not interfering with NGO activities to provide basic necessities, such as registration under the UNHCR, providing accommodation and employment. Developing the ability to be seen by funding organizations as a resource that has not been utilized to improve living standards and has been an integral part of many funding initiatives or resettlement countries for refugees. Grant-making institutions are keen to improve their tools to identify communities with the ability to make positive changes, and community capacity can provide useful criteria for granting or adjusting interventions [16].

The proposed framework goes beyond the definition of the capacity of the community itself, including dimensions that refer to deliberate efforts to build the capacity of the community. In this paper, there are four relevant dimensions adopted and explain its capabilities embedded in a community and where it can be actively involved, supported, or constructed refugee characteristics. The first is the skills, knowledge, and resources identified that are important to the community's capabilities. This dimension includes skills for strategic planning and those related to interpersonal communication and group processes. [5] discuss this in terms of human capital and leadership. He linked human capital and leadership by

explaining that the use of skills, knowledge, and resources by the population through participation in community improvement activities requires the implementation of leadership. This is related to the efforts of refugee-based NGOs by promoting and initiating employment and education opportunities for refugees to improve their independence in the host country. Second, dimensions include the nature of social relationships. Social relationships build community ideas as social networks and social bonds, and are an important component in the construction of social capital. The meaning of social relations highlights the quality of relationships that exist among members of society and the types and strengths of sentiments contained in those relationships. Included in this dimension is the belief that one is important to society; that there is sufficient strength of social relations to overcome serious differences; and one's actions, both individually and collectively, will bring desired results. For this reason, this includes a sense of community, a sense of commitment and harmony, social trust, reciprocal norms, and positive inter-group relationships.

Furthermore, the third dimension is the extent to which civic participation is an important element in the community capacity. This is a clear and distinct dimension, to emphasize its importance, because it serves as an important area of increasing the ability of community intervention strategy. This dimension describes the extent to which individuals in the community care about themselves with the issues of concern of the wider community, including those related to governance. Participation attributes are related to area, depth, and intensity. The basis of broad and representative citizen engagement is possible when there is ongoing conversation with all segments of society. This requires continuous reach and communication efforts from leaders and community members. This also requires vigilance in fostering a sense of mutual trust and the spirit of neighborhood living and interconnected social networks, not just within themselves. Intermediate structure plays an important role in determining the nature, level, and intensity of civic participation, as it provides the primary vehicle for its expression. The fourth is a value system that considers the community capacity to be value-free, and should include the norms, standards, expectations, and desires of a particular society. What is important for the ability is not only that society can articulate a clear and shared set of values, but that these values reflect the moral philosophy of society [17]. Many researchers agree that the core values for capacity building include: equity, democratic participation, collaboration, participation, and social responsibility [18].

## 2. METHOD

This paper employs an exploratory, qualitative research approach. Using a single case study to obtain preliminary data that gaining insight into refugees-based NGO in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Specifically, the aim of this paper is to generate evidence on and better understanding of the role of refugees-based NGO in managing, advocating and promoting a better livelihood of the people in displacement. In-depth interviews were conducted in August 2019, with several staffs of JREC ranging from the Chairman, Director, Coordinators for education and employment program and also teachers at REC in Gombak, Malaysia.

JREC head office is located in Selangor have a few types of programs conducted for Rohingya refugees' communities. It includes education, employment workshop and entrepreneurship program that have been accommodated Rohingya population in Peninsular Malaysia. Above all, education become the distinct aim of JREC as this organization vision is to improve the livelihood of community is purely relying on education. With this principle, Rohingya children are included and being treated as the agent of change of their own community. The researcher also visited the REC Gombak for several times, with the permission of JREC top management in order to observe and gauge an idea of school administration and understanding participation of these children towards education that provided to them.

The interviews were based on the institutional function, that later were analytically analyzed through the spectrum of community capacity that elaborate the role of community in order to enhance these Rohingya refugees' capacity in local community. From the perspective of NGO in Malaysia, the questions were emphasizing on the experiences of managing and administering Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, including opportunities, goals and constraints the organization encountered. Moreover, the interview also touches about the people, networks or institutions that have been most relevant to the NGO in accommodate refugees need in meeting their goals at different stages of advocacy.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The trend of Rohingya refugees entering Malaysia needs attention in terms of ability to provide them with basic needs. It demands shelter, education and

employment because they are entering Malaysia as family unit; as the numbers growing from women to children and living with the locals as embedded community. As one of responsible NGOs in refugee affair, JREC (*Persatuan Jaringan Islam Global Masa Depan*) has significant roles in providing essential services for this group, in particular education and employment engagement program. This sections divides into three important experiences and challenges faced by JREC in order to provide their services to Rohingya refugees under their surveillance. This includes education initiative, employment program for adult and cultural value holds by Rohingya.

### 3.1. Education Initiative

[19] estimates that only 40% of school-age refugee children will have access to any form of education because refugee children are not entitled to attend government schools. Currently, education provided alternatively through informal learning centers supported by UNHCR, NGOs, and faith-based organizations and refugees community themselves. Up to January 2020 there are five Learning Centers (LC) in different states have been operated under JREC management. The oldest center is in Penang, followed by Klang and Gombak in Selangor and just recent years opened in Pahang and Terengganu. These learning centers half funded by UNHCR and state government for example in Selangor, Selangor Islamic Council (MAIS) will support half of the teacher's salary. While in Penang, State Government Islamic Department (JAIP) through Zakat or endowment while Kuantan and Terengganu do not provide additional support to JREC.

There are various concerns and drawbacks are identified in establishing learning centers. Many of these are underfunded or run by volunteers, which is commendable, but naturally results in inconsistencies in terms of what the children learn and the quality of their education. According to Director of JREC, teachers recruited from different background, that initially came as volunteer. Therefore, the challenge to get trained teachers in specific educational background remains crucial. In recent development, JREC has assisted UNHCR to manage the provision of compensations to teachers at these learning centres. The support also indirectly assists the refugee community in building their community by easing the pressure of having to source the funding of their children's education, while motivating the refugee community and the community based learning centres to maintain a good service standard. This contribute to

improve quality of education for refugee children in Malaysia through compensation of teachers, thereby improve the retention of teachers working in refugee learning centres, mitigating turnover of teachers and ensuring that teachers invest their full attention to quality teaching.

It has been argued that, even in the best learning centres, refugee children are still excluded from sitting exams and gaining qualifications, as Malaysia do not ratify the Refugee Convention. For JREC learning centers curriculum, there is no specific school examination, the management and teachers imitate Malaysian school system (KSSR), the syllabus also were interrogating from established school. In their effort to gain formal and registered school for refugee children, *Pusat Pembelajaran Alternatif* (PPA) or Alternative Learning Center is in process of registration with Ministry of Education Malaysia.

JREC initiate this community based school orientation similar to other daily school activities such as timetables, proper classes according to their age or understanding level. The center also provides other services such as transportation to encourage the children discipline to school. As the Director quotes sum up the reasons of having those services:

*School provides transportation in which RM30 per month be borne by the parents of refugees. Our intention is not to burden the parents but they have to commit with this responsibility, otherwise they will not send the kids to school. The reason for this is to avoid school dropouts, as they will not be taking this seriously or if we leave the transportation issue with the parents, I am sure they will not turn up. So we pick them up at certain point usually the most populated area with refugees, they have to wait there and we will come to fetch everyday. This also the way to train them in terms of discipline and time management. The school starts at 7.50am until 1pm. So they have to follow the rules. They also have afternoon Islamic class at their 'madrasah' which runs by their own community.*

In terms of qualification, these refugee children unforeseen their future employment until they get resettle to third country or return back to Rakhine. As JREC added, some of the children were very bright, talented and they were being resettled to the United States and Australia for tertiary education and being sponsored by resettled countries. In previous time, there were once program offered by University Al-Bukhary for refugees however the University has just closed down recently.

In contrast, while UNHCR's resettlement program prioritizes vulnerable refugees [20], the refugees in previous study conducted by [4] consider the program benefit certain refugee the refer as 'wealthy' in regards of their ethnicity and religion, as throughout the 2000s UNHCR executed what has been described as a 'discriminatory (and arguably unfair)' approach [14] to a resettlement that mainly facilitating the resettlement of Myanmar Chin refugees (mostly Christians, relatively new arrivals to Malaysia), with the assumption that the long-established Rohingya Muslim community is better suited for local integration as a long-term solution.

### **3.2. Employment Engagement Program**

The Malaysian government has announced publicly in 2015, the creation of temporary work permits that allow Rohingya refugees to do legitimate work in Malaysia [21]. However, the scheme has partly implemented - for instance, the 2006 plan to issue 10,000 temporary work visas, was suspended due corruption claims [11], [22], [23]. So far, the weak legal status of refugees in Malaysia makes them vulnerable to employment-related abuse and exploitation, including non-partial payment of wages, verbal abuse, arbitrary dismissal, physical abuse, sexual harassment and workplace raids [13]. Refugees have limited way to overcome this problem, and most incidents are not reported.

In this vein, if refugees have a legally protected status, which allows them to earn a living, they can also access and seek medical treatment. In turn, this will encourage a healthier refugee population and workforce, enabling them to continue to work and contribute to society. Looking at these advantages, JREC has rendered Rohingya men with Job Preparedness Workshop. This NGO engages with several employers as collaboration partners in order to obtain job vacancy for this particular group. As stated by Coordinator for Job Preparedness Workshop:

*They were given training and workshop to prepare them to working with the company we have mutual agreement to collaborate to supply Rohingya workers at this stage Gardenia (largest Malaysia bread supplier company). So far, we sent 60 Rohingya to Gardenia and their salary is up to RM2000 per month including over time which is not bad. The workshop has run for two days...one session we can afford of 15 trainees and they were given exposure regarding the job background, language, job procedure because they do not have formal work experience before. We actually have done pilot program related to employment for them...we collaborate with estate manager, however they don't like estate job, they always refuse to work there so they also selective with the job they wanted to commit...kind of attitude issue. We also prepare them for 2 day air-condition or automotive repair course class and later with 3 days' hands-on module.*

Apart of that, many efforts have been made by the JREC for entrepreneurship project for Rohingya women, such as sewing classes, cooking so that they can earn money for their own needs but the project totally failed. Their attitude is that they prefer to stay at home without doing anything to help the family economy. Unlike refugees from Syria, Palestine, Pakistan who are successful in business and survived with small and social entrepreneurship they initiate.

### **3.3. Cultural Value**

When were asked about challenges faced by JREC, the Director has shared her concern pertaining their sustainable aim to provide better education for the children due to cultural barriers that uprooted this community. According to her, girls will drop out of school as soon as puberty because they are still communicating with grandparents in Rakhine/ Arakan. They were asked to drop out of school even

though they were very good in academics. Grandparents' advice is very influential in their lives, especially girls. The most interesting part when they were observed as lack of religious exposure although they are Muslim, as the assumption could be made because of "may be they are following different *mazhab* (school of thought) and have a bit differences to us" however JREC suggest to give more lesson to children in terms of *Fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence) specifically Fardhu Ain classes that need to be guided by a qualified teacher such as graduates from Egypt in which the salary might be covered by Malaysia Islamic Council (MAIM).

In terms of living in embedded community, refugees interviewed in [4] study mostly expressed the positive opinion of Malaysians, with many acknowledging that they had received some form of support in terms of livelihoods such as hiring or helping them get jobs and provide investment capital for refugee businesses. Moreover, the locals overcoming bureaucratic restrictions that refugees prohibited from buying their own, such as motorcycles, and facilitate their access to institutions particularly UNHCR and provide direct assistance of donations in the form of money and goods. Many refugees appreciate that Malaysians are sympathetic to their situations, and record incidents where their rent has been reduced when sympathetic landlords 'pity them'.

However, in this study the NGO mentioned Rohingya refugees find difficulties to mix with the local community as they just want their own community. In addition, the feedback the researcher embarks from REC school teachers that the children really appreciate the arrival of outsiders to visit because they are still traumatized and feel they are not accepted by the local community. Consequently, they were feeling isolated and unacceptable by the locals.

For the long run, the future of new generation of Rohingya has been denoted from JREC aspiration in their devoted work with refugees as mentioned by the Director:

*We are establishing the school of future leaders of Rohingya. We anticipate that they have to go back to Arakan to develop their own earth, help the community who live there. They have to go back...*

This in line with UNHCR framework with three types of long-term solutions where it aims to ensure

safe and sustainable outcomes for refugees. First, voluntary return to their home country, second, refugees are consolidated and integrated into local host country communities and the third is resettlement the way in which the relocation of refugees from transit country to permanent settlement country [24].

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Human Rights Watch published the report *Living in Limbo: Rohingya Burma in Malaysia* in the last two decades [25], thousands of Rohingya refugees are still unprogressive. As a result, the fate of the Rohingya indefinite. They were evacuated and forced to leave their homes and villages. Moreover, the attitude of South Asian countries towards the Rohingya identity is unclear. Almost two million Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh, India, Thailand, Malaysia, UAE, and Saudi Arabia. Bangladesh, despite being a Muslim majority, considers the displaced Rohingya who have crossed their borders and lived outside the camp to be illegal immigrants from Myanmar. International debates continue and suggested many long term solution including sending them to the uninhabited island of Thengar Char in the Bay of Bengal or sending them back to Myanmar and ask the UN to ensure a safe zone in Rakhine state.

As demonstrated by the community capacity, the community seeks the ability of different community members to empower, develop and maintain the well-being of the community and its components. This happens in the context of refugees. It recognizes the importance of individuals, informal groups, organizations, international cooperation, that when one's government does not protect them, it becomes a shared responsibility for others to do so. NGOs have played an important role in addressing issues related to refugees and asylum seekers. The fact is that many people who leave their country of origin will continue to live for many years, sometimes throughout their lives, in Malaysia. Life goes on and when the next generation is born, they must be given the right to get the education given to Malaysian citizens [26]. There should be firm steps to be taken to avoid more social problems that may occur in relation to untreated refugees. However, this indicates a commitment to ensure that there is an appropriate system to respect and protect the rights of refugees in accordance with international standards.

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