



Asia Pacific Network of Refugees

CONFERENCE REPORT AND OUTCOMES

Refugee Leadership during COVID-19 and Beyond

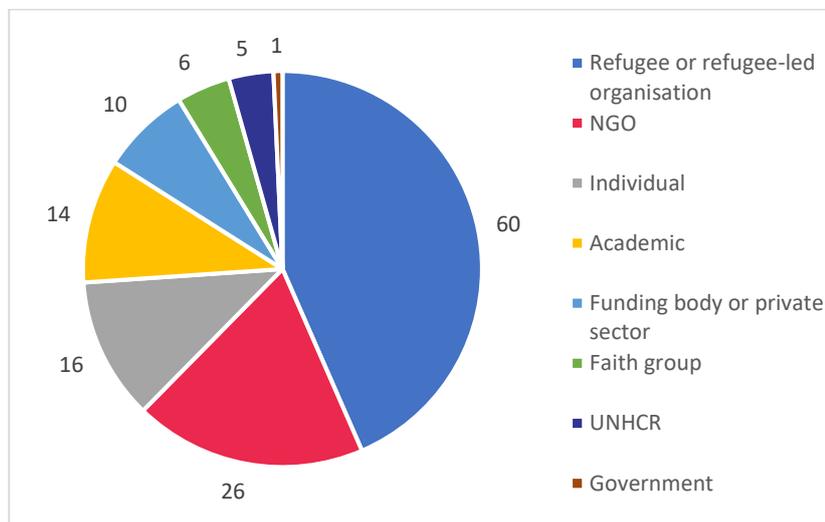
19th of June, 2020 | 2-4pm Bangkok, 5-7pm Sydney

On 19 June 2020, the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR) convened its first virtual regional conference, focussing on the theme of **Refugee Leadership during COVID-19 and beyond**. The conference was held to align with World Refugee Day and involved presentations from 12 refugee leaders living in nine countries across the region (Australia, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Malaysia and Thailand) as well as representatives from UNHCR, the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) and Open Society Foundation. **138 participants** joined the online conference, representing a broad spectrum of stakeholders – refugees, refugee-led organisations, government, non-government organisations, funding partners, academia, faith-based networks and interested individuals.

The following report provides an overview of the event, key messages from presentations, as well as questions and interventions from participants that were posted through the Q&A and chat functions in Zoom. Responses to questions and follow-up links and information are also included in this report.

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

By stakeholder group



By country connecting from

Thailand	26
Malaysia	24
Australia	20
Hong Kong	14
Indonesia	11
Japan	8
UK	6
USA	6
India	4
Singapore	3
Qatar	2
Switzerland	2
Unknown	2
Bhutan, Canada, Iran, Myanmar, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, South Korea, Spain, Turkey	10

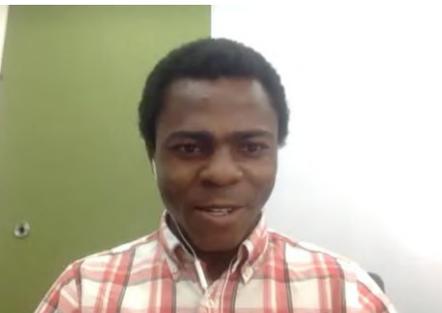
For more information about APNOR and to view a short video highlighting APNOR's response to COVID-19, go to:

www.facebook.com/APNORRefugees/

OPENING | Welcome and objectives

Isack Ibrahim, APNOR Co-founder and Malaysia focal point, welcomed participants to the conference and **introduced APNOR** as the only Asia-wide network of refugees and refugee-led organisations, formed in 2018 and with a leadership committee of members from 12 countries.

Isack outlined the **aims of the conference**, which were to amplify the voices of refugees on the gaps and challenges in COVID-19 responses and to highlight good practices and areas for future collaboration. Isack provided an overview of some of the ways in which APNOR members have been involved in COVID-19 responses, including by: providing material aid for vulnerable families, translating health information and holding online livestream conversations with doctors and nurses in community languages, supporting the ongoing education of children, advocating for the inclusion of refugees in local and national responses, holding national consultations, and fundraising and awareness-raising for refugee-led initiatives.



PANEL 1 | The Asia Pacific context: Stakeholder views on refugee leadership during COVID-19 and beyond

Moderated by APNOR co-founder and Hong Kong focal point **Darius Dzadu Agbeko Kokou**, this session offered insights from different stakeholders on how refugees and refugee-led organisations are or could be included in COVID-19 responses and more broadly.

Dana Alanzy (UNHCR Partnership and Coordination Unit, Geneva) highlighted the **role of refugee-led organisations in the localisation agenda**. Dana referred to [refugee-led organisation \(RLO\) research](#) following on from the [Global Compact on Refugees](#) (GCR) which acknowledged “*responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist.*” This research demonstrates valuable contributions made by RLOs as unique actors and frontline responders that are quick to mobilise, operate at a grassroots level and are trusted locally. Dana also highlighted challenges RLOs face: lack of funding, inability for RLOs to register locally (impacting on funding and recognition), and visa and mobility constraints for RLO representatives to participate in international dialogue. Dana provided an overview of how UNHCR has met its [localisation target](#) in 2019, and spoke of the positive impact of engaging with refugee-led organisations and communities in Cox’s Bazaar, Iran and the Thai-Burma border in response to COVID-19.

Anna Crowley ([Open Society Foundation](#) (OSF), London) spoke on how refugee leaders can **engage donors to support refugee-led initiatives**. OSF has supported the growing mobilisation of refugees around meaningful participation through funding, advocacy and networking support in recognition of the role that refugees play as contributors to responses, to better enable refugee organising, and to shift power within institutions and drive change. Anna suggested that the creation of space for refugee participation in the GCR and [Global Refugee Forum](#) provides an important opportunity to link the two issues of participation and funding. She said: “*Refugees can’t participate on an equal level to others if they have no funding, and they cannot organise to influence if they are only funded to provide humanitarian services as part of someone else’s plan.*” Anna spoke about the limitations of funding models for refugee-led organisations, and called for the development of collective, collaborative solutions to funding refugee-led action at scale, drawing on lessons from other sectors that provide flexible funding at a grassroots level. While Anna recognised that private foundations like OSF have different possibilities to fund compared with what governments and UNHCR can do with public money, she said there are still possibilities to explore, such as donors funding organisations that are working in equal partnership with refugee-led organisations.

Tips for how refugee-led organisations can strengthen engagement with donors

- **Network as widely as possible.**
- **Develop relationships and partnerships:** Long-term trust-based relationships are important, and a track record of working with others is attractive to donors.
- **Be clear about your capacity:** What is it that you need to help you succeed? What obstacles do you face? What requirements can you meet, and what makes partnership impossible? Some donors have tools to fund flexibly, but they may not help you to solve problems that they are not aware of.
- **Be as visible as you can:** Donors cannot fund refugee-led initiatives if they don’t know where to find you. While keeping safety considerations in mind, social media is a useful tool to help donors find you and understand what you do.

- Anna Crowley, OSF

“This conference... represents a significant milestone. There are somewhere between 100 and 115 participants from all over the globe joining APNOR to discuss some of the fundamental issues around refugee participation and decision-making... and refugee control of their own circumstances. This is not a new movement... refugees have been advocating for themselves since methods to control refugees have been in place... What is revolutionary about this particular movement, though, is that the effort for refugee participation here is not coming from the top down.”

– Themba Lewis, APRRN

Themba Lewis ([Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network](#), Bangkok) presented on **how NGOs can be inclusive of refugee leadership and participation**. Themba spoke of the historical background to the refugee participation movement, noting there has been a recognition of the need for refugee participation for decades, but realising this is only now gaining momentum through the formation of networks like APNOR, and is being sped up by digital technologies and COVID-19, which has forced a localisation and the need to invest in people ‘on the ground’. At the same time, Themba noted structural obstacles, such as resistance to change from larger INGOs and governments, and that this is incremental change in which progress *can be measured by events such as this, by the relationships being built, and by the visibility of refugees in high-level policy making*. In this, Themba noted a particular place for (non-refugee) allies and advocates who can bring to this movement long-standing relationships and networks. The question is how others can create an enabling environment for refugee leadership and participation, which requires stepping back and reflecting on existing structures.

In terms of **how other NGOs may become more inclusive of refugee leadership and participation**, Themba suggested this required: an openness to change, a recognition of the benefits of refugee participation, inventiveness and adaptability when there are hiccups, and a willingness to sit back and listen and respect the knowledge and experience of refugees as experts who should hold a central place in the refugee rights movement.

PANEL 2 | Refugee voices: What are the challenges, needs and gaps?



L-R: Moderator Nibras Rahbe (Australia) with presenters Naveed Aieen (Indonesia) and Chukufa (Bangladesh)

Moderated by APNOR co-founder (Australia) **Nibras Rahbe**, this session gave voice to the challenges, needs and gaps facing refugees in Indonesia, Bangladesh, Hong Kong and on the Thai-Burma border.

Speaking about the challenges facing **refugees in Indonesia**, **Naveed Aieen** (APNOR Co-founder and Indonesia focal point) described the lack of access to formal **education** which has led to the establishment of eight refugee community-run schools since 2015. These schools provide education to 1,200 students through volunteer teachers from within the refugee community. However, these schools receive no long-term support and struggle to sustain activities, a situation that has been made more difficult during COVID-19. Schools like [Hope Learning Centre](#) have, however, stepped up, transitioning to teaching online, raising awareness about the pandemic and distributing food and hygiene kits. Challenges currently faced include: lack of access to internet and devices for schools, lack of income support, food and hygiene supplies and timely resettlement for refugees, and lack of access to bank accounts for refugee-led organisations.

Zoom Q&A

Q: Please can we know a bit on how APNOR and UNHCR is supporting refugee representations and meaningful participation at all levels? Representation of refugees from India, Bangladesh etc... representation of refugee community leaders from ethnic groups

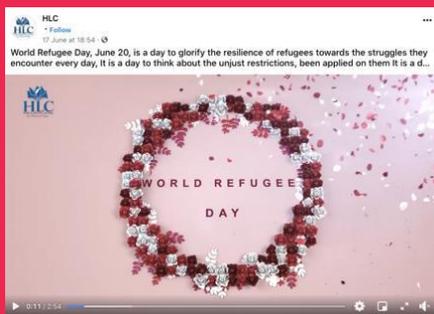
A: APNOR is an emerging network with an interim steering committee. We welcome refugees and refugee-led organisations joining as new members by emailing apnor.refugees@gmail.com.

APNOR will be holding consultations and expanding membership over the next 12 months leading up to the Asia Pacific Summit of Refugees in 2021 when a new steering committee will be elected. In the meantime, APNOR will be reaching out to members when participation opportunities arise.

Refugee-led organisations speak up on World Refugee Day

Statement by the Karen Women's Organization:
<https://www.facebook.com/karenwomenorganization/andkarenwomen.org>

A message from students at Hope Learning Centre in Bogor, Indonesia:
<https://www.facebook.com/216619432135562/posts/934992753631556/?vh=e&d=n>



Chukufa, Head of Rohingya Women's Empowerment and Advocacy Network and APNOR member (**Bangladesh**), spoke by pre-recorded video on the **participation and inclusion of women and girls** and of initiatives in Cox's Bazaar in response to COVID-19. Some of the issues Chukufa's network has been addressing include forced early marriage and trafficking of women and girls; a particularly challenging area where some within the camps do not support the right of women to organise or work outside the home. As she said, *"this is a challenging cultural landscape to navigate."* Chukufa expressed concerns of the community that Coronavirus was being brought into the camp by NGO staff, many of whom have not been wearing protective masks or maintaining social distancing at distribution points. Other challenges include: limited opening hours at distribution points causing crowding and increasing health risks; inadequacy of shelters, particularly for female-headed households; reports of increasing domestic violence; and abduction of girls from camps. Chukufa concluded by saying: *"We are ready to work for the sake of girls and women."*

Speaking from **Hong Kong**, "Mr A" discussed the challenges of **seeking protection** in a country that has not signed the Refugee Convention, describing the multitude of difficulties facing asylum seekers in Hong Kong since refugee status determination transitioned in 2014 from a UNHCR to a government process. Mr A spoke of the difficult pathways to protection, including the use

of detention, the inadequacy of financial support, lack of work rights and the extreme hardship of living with uncertainty for up to 10 years. Mr A described the suffering that comes from a lack of opportunities to be active, making refugees reliant on NGOs, churches and individuals. Speaking of more recent refugee-led advocacy, Mr A concluded: *"It is about us—about refugees—claiming our rights... Participation of refugees might really make a difference."*

Finally, **Ka Nyaw Paw** from the [Karen Women's Organization](#) addressed the challenges of **income generation and livelihoods** for refugees in **Thailand**. On World Refugee Day, KWO will release a statement calling on the Thai government to open up opportunities for refugees to work legally outside camps in Thailand, to generate income as well as contribute economically to the country. Currently, refugees in camps have received some vocational training and small grants for income generation projects, have set up small businesses, and some are employed by NGOs. KWO has been helping women with handicraft projects, with products produced sold at the KWO shop and online for international events such as conferences. Some refugees sneak out of camp and work in the nearby villages as agriculture workers, risking their lives and arrest. Many are exploited by their bosses and do not receive the minimum legal payment. Instead of 300 baht a day, they will get 100 to 80 baht. In terms of solutions, Ka Nyaw Paw called for greater support for organisations like KWO to be able to market refugees' handicraft products; for refugees to be able to receive recognised vocational training skills and certificates that could assist with job transition; and for the Thai government to open up the possibility of local integration.

Zoom Q&A

Q: To all the refugee leaders: please share how you think local civil society organisations can best support your needs. Also for the organisers, would it be possible to create a contact list of the organisations and contacts that can be shared for future networking? In case we can assist in passing your contacts to other organisations who can help your needs.

A: This is a great offer! We have included links to the refugee-led organisations that our speakers were representing in this report. You can also contact APNOR.refugees@gmail.com and the team will be happy to put you in touch with refugee-led organisations active in different countries across the region.

Q. Is there a website or FB page for the refugee rights group in Japan? Thanks!

A. This time we are in a process of registering our network at the metropolitan Tokyo. So, hopefully soon we will share to the social media. If anyone is interested on this please contact selamawiydeset@gmail.com

PANEL 3 | How are refugees responding to COVID-19 across the region?

In this panel, we heard from refugee leaders in Malaysia, Iran, India and Japan speaking about the ways in which refugee communities have been mobilising and responding to the challenges posed by COVID-19.



L-R: Naima Ismail Mohamed (Malaysia), Mohammed Javad Islamzadeh (Iran), Valy Hadi (India), Desale Tesfamariam (Japan)

Naima Ismail Mohamed ([Somali Women's Association Malaysia](#), SWAM) began the panel by talking about the **gendered impact of COVID-19**. During this time, many refugees in Malaysia continue to fear deportation and face detention, xenophobia and hate speech being posted on social media. Since COVID-19, many refugees have lost their source of income or are fearful of being detained at work as new measures are taken to test employees for Coronavirus. Naima reported challenges within refugee communities of domestic violence, poor mental health, lack of access to medical care and basic needs (food and accommodation). The SWAM network has been looking to provide online mental health training and support, but faces challenges where members have no access to internet in their homes. More broadly, community leaders are looking at how they can sustain organisations and community centres and find ways to support livelihoods and education for women and children.

From **Iran**, APNOR Co-founder **Mohammad Javad Islamzadeh** presented on refugee-led **emergency and planning response** during COVID-19. Mohammad Javad spoke of the three million Afghan refugees living in Iran, both registered and undocumented, and the vulnerabilities faced by large numbers who are living under the poverty line as Iran was hit by COVID-19 and businesses closed. In response, the refugee community mobilised to support vulnerable families, produce hand-sewn face masks, disseminate public health information, and purchase and distribute relief packages to those most in need in partnership with APNOR. While the coordination of activities was effective, the main challenge for refugee-led initiatives was lack of resources to meet the scale of needs.

Spokesperson from Afghan Refugees Solidarity Committee in **India**, **Valy Hadi**, described similar challenges facing refugees and asylum seekers in New Delhi impacted by COVID-19, many of whom face difficulties paying rent while work has been restricted by lockdowns and remittances from relatives overseas have

stopped, particularly due to valid passports and visas being required by money transfer companies to receive funds. Valy reported that around 50 refugees have been infected by Coronavirus and ten have lost their lives. In terms of **refugee responses**, there are no refugee-led organisations able to raise the profile of refugees in India, which poses a problem of invisibility in times of crisis such as this.

Finally, APNOR Co-founder and **Japan** focal point, **Desale Tesfamariam**, also spoke about 'invisible refugees'. Desale spoke about over 1000 asylum seekers who have been detained and who have limited access to information in their own languages, including about the COVID-19 pandemic. Some positive actions are being championed by refugees in collaboration with UNHCR, NGOs and universities to allow **access to higher education** for refugees. This is now happening at 11 universities.

Zoom comments

Zomi Refugee Committee (ZRC) in Malaysia: *There are more than 15000 refugees are staying in Malaysia. During epidemic, Movement Control Order (MCO) refugees in Malaysia got support food aids for 2000 families and 10 families for rental fee and 10 women for child delivery from Malaysia NGOs with the help of UNHCR in Malaysia. After Lockdown, no more support from NGOs. But Malaysia Authorities do not allow refugees to work. Refugees do not have job and we do not have any income. Regarding those who are in need of help financially, how can we help?*



Closing panellists: Hayso Thako (Thailand); Najeeba Wazefadost (Australia); Masooma Ramazan (Australia)

NEXT STEPS | Connecting, collaborating and organising for change

Founding APNOR members, **Hayso Thako** (Thailand) and **Najeeba Wazefadost** (Australia), and APNOR Coordinator **Masooma Ramazan**, closed the conference with a series of **key messages**:

This conference has highlighted the ways in which **COVID-19 is adding to the insecurity and vulnerabilities of refugees in many parts of the Asia Pacific region**. Refugees in many countries have been excluded from access to health care, refugee livelihoods have been severely impacted by the shut-down of businesses, and information and preventative measures have been difficult to access in many contexts.

At the same time, we heard how **refugees and refugee-led initiatives and organisations are responding to this crisis** and supporting each other and their local communities, by providing medical care, accessible public health information, material and financial support to vulnerable people, education support, leadership and advocacy to ensure refugees are included in broader responses.

Strong and effective refugee leadership and refugee-led initiatives existed before this crisis, and will continue beyond COVID-19.

There are many examples of **refugee led-initiatives that are effective, innovative and impactful**. This is because the needs and solutions are identified from within communities; we know what will work best and we are committed and accountable to our own communities.

Refugees and refugee-led initiatives face challenges including: lack of access to decision makers to make sure responses are inclusive of refugees, lack of resources to carry out activities and make an impact, and inability to register organisations and access bank accounts in some places.

APNOR are asking organisations, governments, funders and interested individuals to consider: *How can you support and amplify the voices and impact of refugee-led initiatives in your work?*

If you are a refugee or part of an refugee-led organisation, APNOR are asking: *How can we work together to strengthen our communities so that no one is left behind?*

Zoom comments

Shukrullah from New Delhi-India: I would like to suggest to establish a volunteer team who can work together on the challenges and problems of the refugees between the different countries regularly to advocate for refugees. They can have regular on line meeting, they can highlight the challenges and problems, they should collect the various reports from the different regions and prepare the one final general report and share it with the management team of the APNOR and the report can be sent to the United Nation Head Office in Geneva when it is reviewed APNOR. Thank you

Follow-up actions:

If you are from an NGO, government or funding body, [sign the Refugee Participation Pledge](#) and commit to the meaningful inclusion of refugees in decision-making. APNOR was involved in drafting this pledge as part of the [Global Refugee-led Network](#) (GRN). To find out more, go to: <https://www.globalrefugeelednetwork.org/pledge/>

Get behind the [#RefugeesRise Emergency Appeal](#) and make sure refugee-led initiatives on the frontline of responses to the COVID-19 pandemic can get the resources they need and increase their impact. This Appeal is about demonstrating the value of resourcing communities directly.

[Connect with APNOR on social media](#) and we will share stories and try to connect refugee-led organisations and other stakeholders together. Connect with us through Facebook (www.facebook.com/APNORRefugees) or Twitter ([@APNORRefugees](https://twitter.com/APNORRefugees)). We also welcome advice and input on how you would like to communicate with us.

If you are a refugee or refugee-led organisation, [become a member of APNOR](#). We are looking for more people to get involved so we can be louder, stronger and represent the diversity of refugees in this region. To join APNOR, email: apnor.refugees@gmail.com or get in touch with us through social media.

APNOR is planning [consultations](#) in Bangladesh, New Zealand, Japan and Malaysia, as well as planning for the next [Asia Pacific Summit of Refugees](#) in 2021. Connect with APNOR to find out how you can get involved.