

ASIA PACIFIC NETWORK OF REFUGEES (APNOR)

SUPPORTING REFUGEE LEADERSHIP IN THE ASIA PACIFIC REGION DURING COVID-19 AND BEYOND |

COVID-19 is a global pandemic that impacts everyone and does not discriminate based on citizenship. **Refugees are part of communities.**

The speed with which COVID-19 has spread around the globe has been as extraordinary as the impact it has had on communities. This includes refugee communities, but in very particular ways. From refugees in remote and isolated camps, to refugees living in precarious conditions in urban settings, to all whose movement has been blocked by the closing of borders and increased state controls, scores of refugees have been significantly affected both by the arrival of the virus and by state policies implemented in response.

We heard how refugees have been excluded from healthcare systems in hard-hit countries like Iran, how the shut-down of the economy in countries has made previously self-reliant refugees destitute and desperate, and how asylum seekers in Greece remain in cramped conditions ripe for the rapid spread of the virus

COVID-19 is **adding to the insecurity and vulnerabilities of refugees in many parts of the Asia Pacific region.** Many refugees face additional risks and vulnerabilities at this time because:

- They/we have fewer resources to deal with the economic impacts of lockdowns (e.g. are more likely to be reliant on informal economy and insecure employment).
- Some don't have the freedom or privilege to move and practice social distancing.
- They/we have less access to medical services due to legal status, scarcity and affordability issues.
- They/we have less or no access to government services and support.
- They/we have less access to reliable local information about COVID-19, including in community languages.
- Where there are tensions between local and refugee communities, this can be made worse when people feel insecure.
- Etc.

Refugees and refugee-led initiatives and organisations are responding to this crisis and supporting each other and their local communities as frontline responders, by providing:

- medical care (we have doctors, nurses, working or volunteering their time)
- health information (we are translating and sharing information about COVID-19)
- material and financial support to vulnerable people
- education support (we have teachers that are continuing to teach)
- 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** because:

- The needs and solutions are identified from within communities.
- We know best what will work.
- We are committed and accountable to our own communities.
- Etc.

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
- Inability to register organisations and access bank accounts in some places
- Etc.

A new global [advocacy initiative](#), #RefugeesRise, is bringing together refugee leaders from the Asia Pacific region to mobilise support for their communities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Around the world, refugees are using their skills to help the communities in which they live. The #RefugeesRise campaign is about recognising, supporting and amplifying the actions which refugees are undertaking as frontline actors protecting communities in this global public health crisis. These frontline workers include Mahdia Zahidi, an asylum seeker nurse in Australia working 10-hour shifts in her local clinic; Muhadesa, a teacher who volunteers to help with remote education; and Javad, who provides emergency food packages to undocumented refugees in Iran and Afghanistan.

To ground these perspectives, APNOR held virtual consultations with refugees and asylum seekers in the early stages of the pandemic to find out how they are responding locally. These consultations also served to promote awareness and disseminate information to communities which may not have easy access to information. We

To this end, APNOR has drawn on the expertise of refugee doctors and nurses to host live online events in Arabic, Assyrian, Kurdish, Farsi, Dari and English which allow refugees to ask questions and hear from healthcare professionals in their own language. With the support of refugee nurses and doctors, the campaign has also produced bilingual education videos on COVID-19 prevention.

#RefugeesRise
#Every Action Counts
#Year of Welcome

#RefugeeWeek2020



IRAN
Produced 500 masks for undocumented refugees and distributed 500 emergency food packages to families



INDONESIA
Assisted 130 refugee families and 30 individuals with hygiene and food packages.



THAI BURMA BORDER
Provided life saving information on Covid-19 pandemic to Karen refugees in camps.



MALAYSIA
Provided online Education sessions to refugee children on Covid-19 prevention



AFGHANISTAN
Distributed 50 food packages to returned refugee families



At this critical time, the [#RefugeesRise Emergency Appeal](#) is calling for donations to support local refugee-led initiatives in the Asia Pacific region and to deliver services, with a focus on initiatives that have limited access to alternative funding sources. The appeal also aims to build support for refugee participation and representation in all COVID-19 response planning and decision-making. We believe any response to support refugees needs to adapt so that refugees like ourselves can meaningfully participate in strategising, funding and implementing programs and policies that influence our lives.

Meaningful inclusion requires resources, yet up until now, most refugee-led activities and entities have been self-supported, requiring communities to rely on volunteers who, in some cases, have been giving their time for decades. #RefugeesRise is about realigning existing resources to support initiatives promoting meaningful participation by refugees, and recognising that there is considerable capacity within refugee communities to respond to crises like the one we are facing now.