A MODEL OF REFUGEE SELF-GOVERNANCE:

THE CONTRIBUTIONS AND CHALLENGES OF REFUGEE-LED INITIATIVES IN THAILAND

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Asia Pacific Network of Refugees

UNSW Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law

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Cover image:

Protection training with The Border Consortium staff and camp committee members (Sharni Boyall/Act for Peace)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers are increasingly recognising the relevance and importance of 'refugee-led initiatives' (RLIs): organisations, community groups, or other undertakings that are led by refugees themselves. The growing interest in RLIs and recognition of their value is new, but as this report illustrates, RLIs are not. In Thailand, for example, refugee-led Camp Committees, which in some cases have existed as early as the 1970s when large-scale displacement began, play a lead role in governance, coordination, and service delivery for more than 107,000 residents across nine Thai-Myanmar border refugee camps.[1] The work of these Camp Committees serves as a model for refugee self-governance. Outside of the camps, RLIs have also been established to support urban refugees in Bangkok, but the contrast is stark. Only one RLI was identified. Its work is impressive, but it lacks adequate support and no other RLI appeared to be functioning at the time the research was conducted between 2022-2024.

This research has been completed against the backdrop of massive international funding cuts and sudden policy shifts away from humanitarian aid by the international community of States. This report was completed just in time to document the incredible work and impact of refugee-led initiatives to date. Nevertheless, things are changing dramatically and quickly, and while it is unclear how long the current crisis will persist, it appears clear that things are unlikely to return to the way they were before. The report has attempted to capture some of the recent developments while acknowledging that the future is uncertain. Subsequent research will need to reflect on how the current storm has been weathered and to what effect. Still this report provides a baseline against which such research can be compared.

This report is part of a larger research project that looks at RLIs across the Asian region. It follows reports published on the work of RLIs in Indonesia and Bangladesh.[2] The research project explores the ways in which RLIs support and engage with their communities and other stakeholders, as well as the barriers that they face when conducting their work. The report draws on online surveys and key informant interviews with a range of individuals that have personal experience working as a part of RLIs in Thailand.

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[1] The Border Consortium (TBC), *Refugee Camp Population* (August 2025) available at: <https://www.theborderconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/2025-08-August-map-tbc-unhcr.jpg>

[2] Mohammad Baqir Bayani, Patrick Wall, Najeeba Wazefadost and Tristan Harley, *In Endless Transit: Contributions and Challenges for Refugee-led Initiatives in Indonesia* (Act for Peace, July 2023) <https://actforpeace.org.au/app/uploads/2023/07/Indonesia-Report-In-Endless-Transit.pdf>; Jessica Olney, Saiful Haque, *Insecurity, risk, and resilience: The contributions and challenges of refugee-led initiatives in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh* (Act for Peace, 2023) <https://actforpeace.org.au/app/uploads/2023/07/Bangladesh-Report-Insecurity-Risk-and-Resilience.pdf>.

Noh Myar works in the camp management team, meeting with people in vulnerable situations, checking on their needs, and reporting on these needs to ensure access to critical support. (©Sharni Boyall/Act for Peace)

FINDINGS

Refugee self-governance is taking place in the Thai-Myanmar border camps at an extraordinary scale, including:

- Accurate and up-to-date registration and needs assessments covering the entire camp population;
- Established committees that determine how aid should be distributed according to needs;
- Service delivery that addresses a wide range of needs covering water, sanitation, health, shelter, livelihoods, and education;
- A screening by the refugees themselves to assess protection needs;
- Informal justice mechanisms to resolve disputes;
- Security infrastructure to maintain a peaceful environment;
- Massive border-wide coordination meetings, 3 times/year, with all relevant stakeholders are facilitated by RLIs;
- Information dissemination and local level advocacy to authorities on both sides of the border;
- Leadership/capacity building training programs.

FINDINGS (CONT.)

RLIs also face significant challenges

Unfair Expectations and Unequal Support

Preconceptions, a lack of awareness, and a lack of trust towards these RLIs by donors, governments, international institutions, and other NGOs puts extra barriers and burdens onto the RLIs, compounding the challenges that they must overcome to establish effective, efficient, and sustainable services. This is both because the lack of trust translates to inadequate resources and support, and because RLIs are expected to go above and beyond what would be standard practice outside of the camps to satisfy unrealistic demands from governments, donors, international institutions, and other NGOs.

Politicization, erosion of support, and refugee resilience

The current global political climate, including the dramatic withdraw of the United States from humanitarian aid and resettlement programs under the Trump administration, along with other aid reductions underway globally, is resulting in large-scale damage and crisis conditions, undermining the good practices that have been developed over decades, but camp committees, partners, and the Thai government are working together to find solutions resulting in fundamental policy shifts.

Understanding the relatively fewer number of RLIs in the Urban Context

In contrast to the camp-based RLIs, few RLIs have formed and been able to sustain their work in urban areas of Thailand. There are a number of challenges specific to the urban refugee context in Thailand, but as a means of overcoming some of these challenges one impressive example of RLI-to-RLI funding support was identified where an Indonesian RLI has been providing support to a Thailand based RLI. Building on such examples, there may be an opportunity for initiatives like the pooled funding mechanism of the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR) and regional outreach efforts to stimulate the development and sustainability of new RLIs in Thailand's urban areas, by providing flexible funding, mentorship, and strategic support tailored to the unique challenges of the urban refugee context.

INTRODUCTION

REFUGEE-LED INITIATIVES

Refugees have long played a leading role in operationalising protection and supporting each other in situations of deprivation and insecurity. These contributions are often unrecognised, under-supported, under-valued, and rendered invisible. In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the meaningful participation and leadership of refugees themselves in service delivery, coordination mechanisms, governance structures, and decision-making processes. States have also begun to recognise RLIs, for example, in the recently adopted Global Compact on Refugees, which acknowledged that, "Responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist."[3]

Refugee agency is also increasingly a focus of refugee studies, with scholars critiquing assumptions about refugees as passive recipients of aid, and generating evidence of refugees' capacity to shape their own lived realities.[4] In recent years, there has been a focus on the capacity of refugees to self-organise and the phenomenon of non-governmental organisations led by refugees themselves. The term 'refugee-led organisation' (RLO) is increasingly utilized to refer to such organizations.[5] For purposes of this research, the term 'refugee-led initiative' (RLI) has been preferred, because the term 'RLO' may imply some kind of formal organisational registration and many RLIs are not allowed to register. The broader 'RLI' terminology has been preferred as it captures a larger array of refugee-led work that is often invisible. Accordingly, RLIs are defined broadly and inclusively as "organisations, community groups, or other groups that are led by persons that identify as refugees."

Despite increased attention on the work of RLIs, the common assumption remains among governments, policymakers, donors, and civil society actors that RLIs lack capacity and depend on aid. "Humanitarian actors usually assume social protection … to fall entirely under the remit of government initiatives, social enterprises, and civil society actors' and do not conceive of refugees themselves having a major role in addressing situations and circumstances…"[6] The notion of refugees as passive recipients

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[3] *Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Part II Global Compact on Refugees*, GA Res 73/12(Part II), UN GAOR, 73rd sess, Supp No 12, UN Doc A/73/12(Part II) (17 December 2018) Paragraph 34 <https://www.unhcr.org/gcr/GCR_English.pdf>.

[4] See, for example, Barbara Harrell-Bond, Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees (1986, Oxford University Press).

[5] See UNHCR, Definition: Refugee-led Organization (RLO) (UNHCR, January 2023) <https://www.refworld.org/policy/legalguidance/unhcr/2023/en/89475>

[6] Evan Easton-Calabria & Kate Pincock 'Refugee-led social protection: reconceiving refugee assistance' (2018) 58 Forced Migration Review 56; See also Kate Pincock, Alexander Betts & Evan

of aid, is contradicted by the reality of resilience and creativity among refugees who against all odds meet diverse needs with legitimacy and efficiency. This work deserves greater attention and support.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a broader research project that has sought to understand (1) the significance of RLIs in advancing refugee protection and solutions, and (2) the challenges these RLIs face in the Asia Pacific Region. This paper focuses on RLIs in Thailand. The research team, consisted of five researchers, including two with lived experience of displacement. The research team jointly formulated a set of research questions and agreed on the methodologies that would be utilised, ensuring that research was codeveloped and co-owned.[7]

The study primarily seeks to address four fundamental questions:

1. How do refugee-led initiatives support their communities and others?
2. How do refugee-led initiatives engage with and represent their constituents and/or members?
3. How do refugee-led initiatives engage with other stakeholders?
4. What barriers do refugee-led initiatives face when undertaking this work?

Data was collected through desk review of key scholarship and reports, an online survey, and key informant interviews. The online survey served as a means to collect information from individuals aged 18 years or older who have previously or are currently involved in one or more RLIs in Thailand. Key informant interviews were also conducted with representatives of RLIs in Thailand, enabling a more dynamic and comprehensive understanding of their operations and challenges. Mohammad Baqir Bayani (Global Partnerships and Refugee Participation Lead at Asylum Access and Act for Peace Consultant), carried out the bulk of these in-depth interviews, and Brian Barbour (Senior Refugee Protection Advisor at Act for Peace, and Affiliate of the Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law at the University of New South Wales) conducted some follow up interviews.

The research team collaborated with a refugee research ambassador, Hayso Thako of the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) based in Thailand, who played a crucial role in identifying and locating various RLIs. The ambassador facilitated the introduction of Baqir Bayani to the representatives of these RLIs. Fourteen potential RLI interviewees were identified and invited to participate in the study. This included one RLI represented by the research ambassador himself. Among the 14 RLIs identified, ten were camp-based,

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Easton-Calabria, 'The Rhetoric and Reality of Localisation: Refugee-Led Organisations in Humanitarian Governance' (2021) 57 Journal of Development Studies 719, 729.

[7] Guidelines for Co-Produced Research with Refugees and Other People with Lived Experience of Displacement (May 2023) <http://doi.org/10.26190/ghnc-sy80>

while four were urban-based. In the end, six camp-based RLIs and one urban-based RLI participated in the in-depth interviews. Six of the seven RLIs also completed the online survey. The dearth of urban-based RLIs is one of the findings of this research, and as a result, this report understandably focuses more on the work of camp-based RLIs. Where there is no mention of 'camp-based' or 'urban' RLIs, the finding can be assumed to be relevant for both camp-based and urban contexts.

At the outset of each interview, Baqir Bayani obtained verbal consent from the participants, ensuring their agreement to participate and maintaining confidentiality. Although the research team offered interpreter services if required, all interviews were ultimately conducted in English. In recognition of time and effort refugees dedicated to the one-on-one in-depth interviews and the completion of online surveys, compensation (1,778 THB) was provided.

After concluding the surveys and interviews, Baqir Bayani and Patrick Wall (Co-founder, Global Strategic Initiatives Group) led data collection, analysis and initial drafting of this report. Najeeba Wazefadost (Founder and Chief Executive of the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees), Tristan Harley (Senior Research Associate at the Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law), and Brian Barbour provided oversight and guidance on the research's strategic direction. Brian Barbour conducted some follow up interviews with the research Ambassador, BUCC, The Border Consortium, and Asylum Access and led revision and final drafting of the report. Subsequently, Baqir Bayani shared the final draft of the paper with the research participants, who had demonstrated their interest in reviewing the report before its publication. We incorporated their feedback to ensure their perspectives were duly considered.

Each of the seven RLIs interviewed agreed to be identified. They are listed below, and sincere appreciation is owed to each for the participation in the research.

1. Karen Women's Organisation (KWO)[8]
2. Karenni National Women's Organisation (KNWO)[9]
3. Karen Refugee Committee (KRC)
4. Karen Student Network Group (KSNG)[10]
5. Karen Refugee Committee- Education Entity (KRCEE)[11]
6. Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN)[12]
7. Bangkok Urban Community Club (BUCC)[13]

[8] See: <https://karenwomen.org/>
[9] See: <https://knwo.org/>
[10] See: <https://ksngkawthoolei.wordpress.com/>
[11] See: <https://krceeobd.weebly.com/>
[12] See: <https://www.karenpeace.org/>
[13] See: <https://www.mybucc.org/>

BACKGROUND

THE LEGAL AND OPERATIONAL CONTEXT OF REFUGEE PROTECTION IN THAILAND

Thailand has direct experience of displacement and providing refuge that is ancient and enduring.[14] In the mid-1700s, the Burmese Empire, destroyed Ayutthaya, with many displaced around the region, including Thongduang who later became Rama I, the first monarch of the Chakri dynasty, which still rules today in Thailand.[15] More recently, Thailand has hosted large populations of Indochinese refugees and Burmese refugees along with a smaller more diverse group of asylum-seekers from around the globe.

As of August 2025, TBC reported 107,476 confirmed to be living in the camps.[16] The vast majority of these—some 95%—are members of ethnic minorities from Myanmar (mainly Karen and Karenni) who live primarily in nine camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. UNHCR also reports around 6,000 refugees and asylum seekers from some 40 countries live in and around Bangkok. The total figure of refugees, including all those living inside and outside of the camps is likely far higher than what is documented. Some estimate at least 50,000 other refugees from Myanmar now live in urban areas in Mae Sot, Chiang Mai and Bangkok, and another 10-15,000 in remote areas along the Thai Myanmar border which would not be included in any official statistics. The number of refugees outside of the camps are believed to have increased substantially after the coup in Myanmar in 2021.

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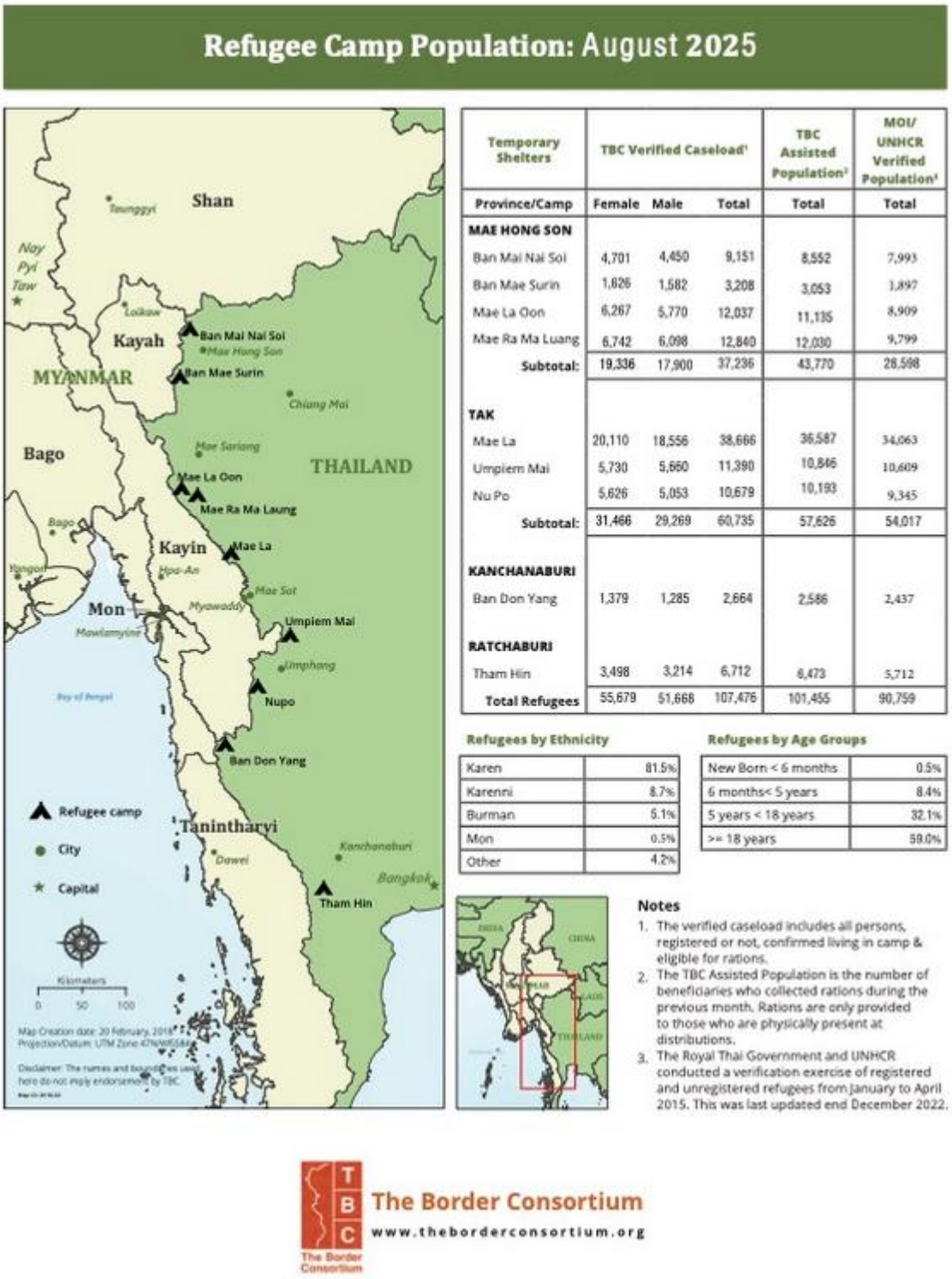
[14] Muntarbhorn, *The Status of Refugees in Asia* (Clarendon Press Oxford, 1992) 125-126. ("Asylum seekers have come to Thailand for many Centuries… Some two centuries ago many Vietnamese, led by royalty, sought refuge in Thailand, and they were accorded hospitality… Groups of Mons and Chinese were also admitted as refugees…"); See also Brian Barbour, 'A 'Whole-of-Society Approach' to Refugee Protection in Asia' (PhD Thesis, University of New South Wales, 2024), Chapter 3 <doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/30176>.

[15] David K. Wyatt, *Thailand: A Short History* (Yale University Press, 2nd Ed, 2003) 115-121.

[16] At the end of 2024, UNHCR counted 84, 421 refugees and a further 2,604 asylum seekers in its Global Trends Figures. UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2024* (June 2025) <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends>. This does not match the 90,759 camp-based population that was last verified by UNHCR/MOI at the end of 2022. (*See:* TBC, above n 1.) The TBC figures are published with monthly updates and are much more accurate than any other figures available.



In the 1980s, there were large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers from Indochina coming into Thailand.[17] In 1989, States met in Geneva and agreed to a "Comprehensive

[17] Richard Towle, 'Processes and Critiques of the Indo-Chinese Comprehensive Plan of Action: An Instrument of International Burden-Sharing' (2006) 18 *International Journal of Refugee Law* 537, 540; Penelope Mathew and Tristan Harley, *Refugees, Regionalism and Responsibility* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2016).

Plan of Action on Indo-Chinese Refugees."[18] The CPA led to the establishment of refugee status determination (RSD) procedures in Thailand. RSD was conducted by the Royal Thai Government under the refugee definition provided in the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol.

The CPA has received extensive examination in the scholarship, including a discussion of its legacy.[19] Some scholars conclude that the CPA may have legitimised the notion of "transit countries" or "countries of first asylum", entrenching the notion that Asian States can permit persons to remain temporarily on their territory, and go through a UNHCR RSD process, but only so that they can be resettled in third countries.[20] Other scholars focus on the positive, concluding that the CPA is one of the strongest examples of responsibility-sharing globally, finding that it achieved an impressive level of protection for large numbers of refugees.[21]

The CPA procedures in Thailand were limited to a select number of Indochinese refugee populations. For example, refugees from Laos and Cambodia were present, but not covered by the CPA, and they were kept in separate camps. Increasing numbers of refugees from Myanmar were also fleeing into Thailand at the same time.

With escalating conflict inside Myanmar, communities began to flee into Thailand in the late 70s and early 80s. Initially they negotiated with local Thai authorities and established themselves around systems they had brought with them.

> "They set up camp committees and health and education departments. They built warehouses, maintained monitoring systems and built upon their community networks for justice and social welfare. Teachers from within the communities taught in their own languages. Health agencies provided training to community health workers to treat the common diseases in the border areas… For ten years this model was seen as ideal: refugees taking care of their day-to-day lives."[22]

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[18] *Draft Declaration and Comprehensive Plan of Action*, A/CONF.148/2 (8 March 1989) <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/66134> ('CPA'), adopted by GA Res 44/138, UN GAOR, 44th sess, Supp No 49, 82nd plen mtg, UN Doc A/44/49 (Vol.I), Corr.1 and Corr.2 (15 December 1989).

[19] See, for example, Kate Jastram, 'Regional Refugee Protection in Comparative Perspective Lessons Learned from the Asia Pacific, the Americas, Africa, and Europe' (2015) *Kaldor Centre Policy Brief 2* <https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/Policy_Brief_2_Regional_refugee_protection_in_comparative_perspective.pdf>; Mathew and Harley, above n 9.

[20] W. Courtland Robinson, 'The Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indochinese Refugees, 1989–1997: Sharing the Burden and Passing the Buck' (2004) 17 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 319–333; Ann C. Barcher, 'First Asylum in Southeast Asia: Customary Norm or Ephemeral Concept?' (1991) 24 *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics* 1253-1286.

[21] Towle, above n 17.

[22] Sally Thompson, 'Community-based camp management' (April 2008) 30 *Forced Migration Review* 26-28. <https://www.fmreview.org/thompson/#_edn1>

As Hayso Thako, of the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC), noted in his interview, "KRC was established in response to the refugee crisis in the Thai-Burma border in 1980". The Camp Committees were all established at around this time and in response to this need. In 1984, the Thai government invited the churches, which had been helping the Karen and Karenni refugees crossing the border, to formally provide assistance to newly arriving refugees. This led to the formation of The Border Consortium (TBC).[23] TBC works closely with the refugee-led Camp Committees. The Thai government also invited non-governmental organizations (NGOs) coordinated through the *Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand* (CCSDPT),[24] who were already providing assistance to Cambodian, Laotian and Vietnamese refugees to turn their attention to this population.

> "UNHCR was largely absent throughout this period. There was no official screening process. Refugees crossed the border, entered the nearest camp, reported to the refugee camp committee and were generally added to the camp register."[25]

Refugee Committees, such as, the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC), the Karenni Refugee Committee (KnRC), and the Mon National Relief Committee, established by refugees themselves, took the lead on the response, with CCSDPT and its members, including members of TBC, working through those refugee committees.[26] The military in Myanmar eventually gained control of border areas and conducted attacks on camps. This resulted in a change to Thai policy with camps consolidated and fenced in. It was only at this point that UNHCR was invited to engage in the response and a larger international response was mobilised.

There are currently nine refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border.[27] These camps are the result of consolidations over the years of many smaller settlements along the 2,400-kilometre border.[28]

Persecuted minorities have been crossing the Thai-Myanmar border into Thailand to flee ethnopolitical conflict since the 1970s and 80s, rendering this one of the most

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[23] Initially called the Consortium of Christian Agencies (CCA), the organization has grown, mobilized resources and support, and changed its name several times first to the Burmese Border Consortium (BBC) in 1991; then to the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) in 2004; and finally to The Border Consortium (TBC) in 2012.

[24] See: Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT) <https://www.ccsdpt.org/>.

[25] Thompson, above n 22.

[26] The Border Consortium (TBC), *Between Worlds: Twenty Years on the Border* (January 2004) <https://www.refworld.org/reference/countryrep/tbbc/2004/en/76147>.

[27] The nine camps are: (1) Ban Nai Soi, (2) Ban Mae Surin, (3) Mae La Oon, (4) Mae Ra Ma Luang, (5) Mae La, (6) Umpiem Mai, (7) Nu Po, (8) Ban Don Yang, (9) Tham Hin.

[28] The majority of the population are of Karen ethnicity, with Karenni making up the second largest ethnic community. But there are also Burman, Mon, and other ethnic groups.

protracted refugee situations in the world.[29] Although initially envisaged as a tool for short-term crisis response, and still called 'Temporary Shelters' by the Thai government, these camps have become indefinite, confined camps for the large populations that live there.[30]

Thailand is not Party to the Refugee Convention but is Party to most core Human Rights treaties. [31] Thailand has also been an active member of the Asian African Legal Consultative Organization (AALCO) since 1961, joining all discussions and endorsing all iterations of the Bangkok Principles on the Status and Treatment of Refugees. [32] Domestically, refugee protection is managed as a matter of policy and practice under the discretionary authority granted by the *State Administration Act* and the 1979 *Immigration Act*.[33] According to the 1979 Immigration Act, persons entering the country without proper authorisation are subject to arrest, detention, and deportation.[34] There is no specific legal status for refugees, and so these provisions apply without any such distinction. However, the law provides executive discretion, which has been repeatedly exercised. This includes, for example, to permit refugees from Myanmar to reside in border camps.[35] Provincial Administration Boards (PABs) have been established at times

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[29] Carrie Perkins, 'Rethinking Repatriation: Karen Refugees on the Thai-Myanmar Border' (PhD thesis, Southern Methodist University, 2019) <https://scholar.smu.edu/hum_sci_anthropology_etds/7/>; Shayne Bloomfield-Wong, 'Understanding Karen women's experiences in refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada' (PhD thesis, University of Manitoba, 2021) <https://mspace.lib.umanitoba.ca/items/55f02ff5-d743-4b50-86b5-46ba97726281>.

[30] Elisabeth Olivius, 'Sites of repression and resistance: political space in refugee camps in Thailand' (2017) 49 *Critical Asian Studies* 289; Kirsten McConnachie, *Governing Refugees: Justice, Order and Legal Pluralism* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), ch 1.

[31] Thailand is party to 8 core international human rights treaties: (1) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); (2) International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); (3) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); (4) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); (5) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD); (6) Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT); (7) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD); and (8) International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance (ICPPED).

[32] Asian African Legal Consultative Organization, *Bangkok Principles on the Status and Treatment of Refugees* (adopted at the 8th Session, Bangkok, 1966; and amended and adopted at the 40th Session, New Delhi, 2001). <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3de5f2d52.html>.

[33] *[Kingdom of Thailand] State Administration Act* (B.E. 2534) 1991, Section 11(8) <http://web.krisdika.go.th/data/outsitedata/outsite21/file/State_Administration_Act_BE_2534_(1991).pdf> ('*Thailand State Administration Act*'); *[Kingdom of Thailand] Immigration Act* (B.E. 2522) 1979, Section 17 <https://www.refworld.org/docid/46b2f9f42.html> ('*Thailand Immigration Act*').

[34] Thailand Immigration Act, B.E. 2522 (1979), 30 May 1979 <https://www.refworld.org/docid/46b2f9f42.html>

[35] UNHCR, 'Analysis of Gaps in Refugee Protection Capacity – Thailand' (November 2006) <https://www.refworld.org/docid/472897020.html>

to screen persons coming in and out of Myanmar and assessing the status of "persons fleeing fighting" and "persons fleeing political persecution".[36]

Since the United Nations Leaders' Summit on Refugees in September 2016, the Thai Government has made a number of commitments and taken a number of progressive steps to implement those commitments.[37] This includes additional pledges made in 2019 at the first Global Refugee Forum (GRF) and again in 2023 at the second GRF.[38] For example, the Thai Cabinet approved on 24 December 2019 the establishment of a National Screening Mechanism (NSM), though the mechanism did not launch until 2023.[39] Sub-Division 4 (SD4) was established within the Immigration Bureau to implement the NSM, and screening began towards the end of 2023. Also in 2019, the Thai government endorsed a Memorandum of Understanding on Measures and Approaches Alternative to Detention of Children in Immigration Detention Centres (MOU-ATD)[40] and completed associated Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in 2020. In 2022, a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) was set up to assist victims of human trafficking.[41] A commitment to Education for All also seeks to ensure that all children, regardless of legal status, are entitled to access basic education.

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[36] See: UNHCR, *Camp Profiles* (2011) <https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/seisaku/nanmin/yusikishakaigi/dai6/siryou4.pdf>; and Yonradee Wangcharoenpaisan, 'Refugee Status Determination (RSD) Practices in Thailand' (Masters Thesis, Thammasat University, 2017) <http://ethesisarchive.library.tu.ac.th/thesis/2017/TU_2017_5966040015_7036_6596.pdf>.

[37] *Summary Overview Document: Leaders' Summit on Refugees* (11 November 2016) <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/sites/default/files/public_summary_document_refugee_summit_final_11-11-2016.pdf>.

[38] See: 'Pledges and Contributions Dashboard' (Web Page) <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/channel/pledges-contributions>. Pledges were also made at the second GRF in 2023 to strengthen the NSM by: investing in data and interpretation systems; developing protection and referral frameworks; conferring appropriate legal status to the "Protected Person"; enhancing cooperation between government agencies and civil society through whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches; and cooperating with partner countries, UNHCR, and the Asylum Capacity Support Group (ACSG).

[39] For some preliminary analysis of the NSM, see Kate Coddington, 'Approaching Thailand's National Screening Mechanism through Affective Governmentality: Protection and Competent Governance of Maintaining the Status Quo?' in Susan Kneebone et al (eds) *Refugee Protection in Southeast Asia: Between Humanitarianism and Sovereignty* (Berghahn, 2025) 140-158.

[40] See a full copy of the MOU here: https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Eng-Version_MoU_ATD_Final.pdf

[41] See details in: International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Guidelines on the National Referral Mechanism* (2023) <https://thailand.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1371/files/documents/2024-03/guidelines-on-nrm-to-protect-and-assist-survivors-en.pdf>

REFUGEES AND RLIS IN THAILAND: CAMP-BASED AND URBAN CONTEXTS

There are a large number of RLIs working inside and around the Thai-Myanmar border camps. Key informants report that there are more than 20 different community-based organizations inside the camps alone, with at least another five to ten around Mae Sot and likely many more. Some groups are organized around theme, geography, identity or religion, rather than community. Many are working on both sides of the border or have key cross-border connections.

CAMP COMMITTEES: A MODEL OF REFUGEE SELF-GOVERNANCE

The inner workings of the camps are overseen by Camp Committees managing health, livelihoods, supplies, security, and informal justice mechanisms, among other responsibilities. Elections for positions in Camp, Zone, and Section Committees are held every three years to determine key leadership positions. There is individual or household voting depending on the camp.[42]

Mu Taw is the vice chairperson for a camp committee taking a leading role in camp management and consulting the wider camp community to ensure services and opportunities meet their ever-evolving needs. (© Sharni Boyall/Act for Peace)

[42] This is an election year. Elections are proceeding at the camp level, however, KRC and KnRC both have deferred elections until later in the year due to the high uncertainties around funding.

The Thai government, UNHCR, and NGOs all rely on the Camp Committees for the bulk of governance, coordination, and service delivery. These camp-based community governance and justice mechanisms are, of course, themselves RLIs. Indeed, they are RLIs on whom the Royal Thai Government relies, and this has created space for the camp residents to exercise a degree of political freedom that is rare compared with other camp settings around the globe.[43]

Camp Committees and TBC conduct an annual census of the nine camps, called the Annual Population Verification (APV), establishing an updated registration of the entire population. Monthly Updated Population Figures (MUPF) are then also conducted and reported.[44] Camp Committees and TBC also manage a 3-monthly Ration Distribution Record (RDR) for food/cooking fuel distribution. These continuous registration procedures identify refugees eligible for assistance and services. They also document births, deaths, arrivals, departures, generating a total population database. The Section Committees are the first port of call for refugees who need information or services. All of this everyday case management results in an incredibly accurate assessment of populations and their specific needs. UNHCR, the Thai government, and NGOs may generally defer to their own lists relating to their respective registration rounds, but in practice, the everyday operations of the camps rely on the more accurate registration data produced on an ongoing basis by the Refugee Committees and TBC.

Meh Reh has lived in the camp for 27 years. Some relatives have moved to America while his hopes for return to Myanmar have been repeatedly dashed by conflict and coup. Education is only available through secondary school, and there are limited opportunities for employment. He sells food to earn an income, but food security is an issue. (© Sharni Boyall/Act for Peace)

[43] McConnachie, above n 30, 313.

[44] See regular reporting here: https://www.theborderconsortium.org/resources/key-resources/camp-population/.

Sam is a field officer and works in the camps refugee certification processes. (©Ben Littlejohn/Act for Peace)

Alongside the above-described registration, Camp Committees also assess whether new arrivals and re-entries to the camp have a claim for protection as "persons fleeing fighting". This 'status' is what makes the person eligible for social support services in the camps. There is a constant processing of claims for support for all new arrivals and re-entries for those who were previously registered but then went outside the camps and subsequently returned. It is not the same thing as refugee status determination, but it is a comparable processing of claims. Persons who are not recognised by this process are not eligible for support, and there is a time lag. While the claim is processed the person cannot access support. Some interim measures are available. Household needs and status also determine a level of support based on needs through this process.

It has been argued that the 'humanitarian regime' in Thailand 'privileges refugee passivity and impedes recognition of refugees as political actors': '[p]olitical organising and action by refugees is often neglected, bypassed, and even repressed by host governments and humanitarian aid agencies due to concerns about security and order'.[45] Others observe, however, that this neglect has opened up space for political organisation by refugees. In the absence of action by the Royal Thai Government, which has legal jurisdiction over the camps but has 'historically done little to police internal camp affairs',[46] a range of community governance and justice mechanisms have emerged as the main forum to resolve disputes and address problems. This judicial system in the

[45] Olivius, 'Sites of repression and resistance' above n 30, 290.
[46] McConnachie, above n 30, 215.

camps handles civil cases, while criminal cases are referred to the Thai justice system. At the apex of these mechanisms are the refugee committees, whose members are elected and responsible for the day-to-day running of the camp in question.[47] These mechanisms enjoy a 'high degree of popular legitimacy' amongst camp residents and are credited with maintaining a 'high level of social order and political stability'.[48]

THE STRUGGLE OF RLIS IN THE URBAN CONTEXT

While extensive outreach and consultation was conducted, and four potential leads on urban-based RLIs were uncovered, only one existing RLI in the urban context of Thailand was identified to participate in the research.[49] This was the Bangkok Urban Community Club (BUCC).[50]

Compared to the large populations in the Thai-Myanmar border camps, the number of urban refugees in Thailand is much smaller and much more diverse, representing over 40 different countries of origin. The smaller number and diversity of urban refugees in Thailand may account for the smaller number of RLIs. Ongoing protection risks in urban contexts are also likely impeding the formation and growth of RLIs in Thailand. Finally, turnover when refugees are resettled may also be an issue for sustainability of these RLIs. For example, the BUCC founder was resettled to Australia. Before departure, however, the current coordinator of the initiative was brought in to take the lead on BUCC activities.

BUCC was established in 2019 to support and provide opportunities for displaced people in Bangkok. BUCC offers free education, hosts events, and conducts community building workshops. Educational programming includes English language classes from beginner to advanced (with no age limitation), basic mathematics for children, and computer and digital literacy. These are both online and in-person. BUCC reports that, “we are afraid if too many gather it might lead to problems, also we cannot provide financial support for travel reimbursement, so online is generally preferred.” BUCC consults community members by “putting an online survey in the community and receiving responses.”

In an urban setting, it is difficult for an RLI to register and set up bank accounts. For example, an RLI could receive money through an intermediary, but such a workaround poses risks and has limitations. Often, donors and NGOs see bank accounts of RLIs under

[47] Elisabeth Olivius, 'Political space in refugee camps: Enabling and constraining conditions for refugee agency' in Eva Hansson & Meredith L. Weiss (eds), *Political Participation in Asia: Defining and Deploying Political Space* (Routledge, 2017), 174.
[48] McConnachie, above n 30, 50.
[49] Compared to the other 3 countries reviewed for this mapping research (Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Malaysia), the identification of only 1 RLI in the urban refugee context in Thailand stands in stark contrast to the other jurisdictions were a much larger number of initiatives were identified.
[50] See the mission and statement of intent of Bangkok Urban Community Club (BUCC) https://www.mybucc.org/about-bucc

individual names as a red flag that puts their credibility under question, and ultimately, due to a lack of understanding of RLI limitations, donors refuse to fund their work.

The denial of the right to work or limited refugee status have posed additional challenges for RLIs. Many initiatives heavily rely on the contributions of refugees who possess valuable skills and knowledge. However, the absence of legal employment opportunities for refugees has restricted RLI's ability to fully leverage their expertise within the initiatives. This compromises the initiatives' sustainability and perpetuates economic marginalisation among the refugee population.

2025 CRISIS: HUMANITARIAN COLLAPSE AND SUCCESSFUL POLICY SHIFTS

Early 2025 was characterised by sudden and dramatic funding cuts, mainly, but not only, from the United States resulting in massive withdrawal of support for the work taking place across the Thailand-Myanmar border. In Thailand, this has resulted in withdrawal of support for food, fuel for cooking, health clinics, and other critical services and programs. The consequences have been life-threatening. For example, the shutdown of some clinics without notice resulted in the death of some patients. The cuts have also resulted in reductions to staffing, causing a loss of experience, expertise, and capacity.

Shortfalls have happened in the past, but gaps have generally been met through a subsequent uplift or alternative donors. In 2025, a later uplift was not possible, and no other donor was able to fill the gap, so the shortfall has persisted with operational consequences, including: reduction or termination of support to individuals and families, rationing, and an associated increase in hunger and desperation. As a direct consequence of the aid cuts, there are more people going outside of the camps to find work and support the family. In the case of the US, an eventual waiver allowed for some work to re-engage temporarily. A new contract was also signed with the US at the end of September 2025 framed as a transition to provide support through to the end of the year, but with a notification that there will be no funding after that point.

The decimation of budgets and staffing and abandonment of humanitarian structure has been overwhelming for all those affected, and yet, the mobilization by refugees and supporters, has also been impressive. On 26 August 2025, Thailand's cabinet approved a resolution that will allow Myanmar refugees living in camps along the border to work legally.[51] Under this policy, registered residents in the nine shelters are permitted to work in all sectors not prohibited for foreign nationals, for a period of up to one year, subject to health screening and registration for health insurance. For decades, camp-based refugees have been barred from working legally, moving freely, or accessing public

[51] Government of Thailand, Public Relations Department, 'UNHCR Commends Thai Government for Allowing Myanmar Refugees to Work Legally in Thailand' (27 August 2025) <https://thailand.prd.go.th/en/content/category/detail/id/48/iid/418446>.

services, leaving them largely dependent on foreign aid. The change represents a massive policy shift, and will require fundamental shifts to existing ways of working.

These positive changes in Thailand have been the result of tireless, strategic, and collaborative advocacy and dialogue involving refugee camp committees and leaders, TBC, CCSDPT, UNHCR, and Thai government officials. Circumstances also contributed to political will because the conflict on the Cambodian border has resulted in the departure of a large number of Cambodian migrant workers causing a work force gap that the refugee communities could help to fill. Furthermore, the urgency of the situation with communities facing large scale humanitarian collapse is being met with compassionate and pragmatic tenacity to address the sudden politically driven crisis.

The Thai government efforts mark a positive shift. These developments have been accompanied by a recent strengthening and deepening of working relationships between the Thai government and other stakeholders with more transparent and open dialogue taking place. Government and civil society, including refugee communities are speaking more openly and in pursuit of practical solutions, and this is resulting in increasing agreement on policy.

Along with the announcement of work rights and freedom of movement, the government announced 160 million bhat in funding into the Ministry of Health to support hospitals near the camps.[52] The funding is critical, but scale up takes time, and the capacity to meet the increase in needs is difficult to sustain. There are 1,000 community health workers in the camps that could support the health response, but it is not clear if they could be integrated into the local health sector.

Other challenges also remain:

- The government figures being used to grant work rights are 6 years old from the most recent registration that took place in 2019. This is prior to COVID, the coup in Myanmar, escalating conflict in Myanmar, and other major developments. It is unclear how these figures will be updated to reflect the current population?
- With the ongoing and escalating conflict in Myanmar, and new conflicts erupting, displacement is also far from over, and there are likely to be new arrivals so long as the conflict persists in Myanmar. The military junta is trying to regain territory with massive attacks on ethnic armed groups and civilians in lead up to elections, after losing enormous territory.
- Not everyone in the camps can travel and engage in work, with many children and persons in vulnerable situations likely to remain where they are. Families may be separated by distance through this initiative, with some members traveling to work and sending resources back to family in the camps.

[52] Apinya Wipatayotin, 'Somsak eyes health boost for Myanmar refugees' (4 September 2025) *Bangkok Post* <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/3098372/somsak-eyes-health-boost-for-myanmar-refugees>.

- Much work will now need to be outside of camps requiring a shift in infrastructure and capacity to a more decentralized approach.
- it is unlikely that work rights and opportunities for self-sufficiency will be enough to fill the gap left by the cuts of human and financial resources to the humanitarian sector particularly for individuals in vulnerable situations and members of the family that will remain behind in the camps?

Camp committees and refugee leadership will be key to addressing each of these challenges. Already, camp committees are engaged in 'go-and-see visits' to the locations where employers and labour needs are located. They also plan to work on pre-departure trainings and organizing support for their camp communities.

The positive policy developments in Thailand are illustrative of the impact of a 'whole-of-government' and 'whole-of-society' approach to very challenging circumstances. This collaboration and coordination will continue to be important moving forward. TBC refers to 'whole-of-community solutions' noting that the whole community will need to be part of the system reforms.

All RLI contributions and challenges discussed below are primarily related to the context as it has been to date, we note that changes are expected in all areas moving forward.

RLI CONTRIBUTIONS

Camp-based RLIs have engaged in all aspects of governance, coordination, and service delivery. The RLIs have delivered services and programs based on refugee community needs. Their work has included managing water, sanitation, health, livelihoods, and informal justice mechanisms among other activities. Educational programs have encompassed early childhood development, formal Karen education systems, vocational training, and higher education opportunities. Livelihood and skills training initiatives have covered baking, beauty services, tailoring, mechanics, and agriculture. RLIs have also addressed social issues such as domestic violence prevention, drug rehabilitation, and peacebuilding activities. Refugees have served as nurses and medics. Many have been trained and supervised by NGO doctors and they have played a crucial role in managing, coordinating and providing primary medical treatment within camp clinics. They have also facilitated referrals to Thai hospitals. Other services have included cultural and recreational activities, political advocacy, information sharing, community representation, protection monitoring, research, and skills development programs.

Local authorities have overseen security outside the refugee camps, but within the camps there has been a lack of internal security infrastructure. The camp-based RLIs supported by TBC have, therefore, also taken on the responsibility of recruiting and training refugee personnel to ensure internal security and sustain a tranquil environment. This has received some support from NGOs. RLIs have also engaged in

advocacy to protect human rights and improve policy in Thailand and Burma. The diversity and depth of these programs of work rival those of government administrations.

"I believe that when it comes to cases involving women, having another man investigate the situation may not always be appropriate… there's a need for a courageous woman to take on this type of work." Saw Meh works as a security officer supporting women as an investigator of gender-based violence. (©JP/Act for Peace)

RLI ENGAGEMENT WITH OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

The Thai government, UNHCR, and NGOs have all relied upon the Camp Committees, and have generally supported their role in governance, coordination, and service delivery. Massive border-wide coordination meetings have been held three times a year with three full days of meetings including representation from all Camp Committees, the Ministry of Interior, UNHCR, and NGOs. The first day is a closed-door meeting of the Camp Committees focusing on camp management. TBC has participated in that meeting providing logistical and financial support. Days two and three have full participation, but they are chaired and facilitated by the refugee committees.

HOW DO REFUGEE-LED INITIATIVES ENGAGE WITH AND REPRESENT THEIR CONSTITUENTS/MEMBERS?

Camp Committees and other RLIs in the camp context are generally community based, representing primarily Karen and Karenni ethnic groups. Other RLIs in the camp context target particular population groups such as women, children, youth, elderly, or persons with disabilities.

RLIs are deeply embedded within their communities and regularly consult with their community members. They emphasize listening to the community interests and needs, updating the community on programs and new decisions, and striving to ensure that their services are relevant and based on actual needs. There appears to be a high-level of trust between RLIs and their communities. RLIs hold participatory workshops, trainings, and regular meetings with local staff. Communication is also through video calls, social media platforms, email, and messaging applications like WhatsApp, Signal, and Line.

The Karenni National Women's Organisation (KNWO) shared that programs are usually set in congress meetings. "Before implementing the new changes, we share them with our community members through information-sharing sessions and consult." KRC "consults collectively with camp leaders if a new program is added or an old one is removed and camp leaders work closely with the camp population."

Initiatives led by refugee women 'have been a key driving force behind changes towards increased participation of women in camp leadership and other public roles'.[53] By changing the 'conception of women's participation as a resource for humanitarian aid effectiveness', they have sought to reclaim the issue of women's participation as being—above all—one of 'equality, rights, and justice'.[54] Another author described the activities of these women-led RLIs as 'an important assertion of political identity by women who are otherwise systematically denied agency'.[55]

Our research found that camp-based initiatives were significantly shaped by founders. For example, Karen and Karenni refugee women leaders have had long-standing involvement with their initiatives. While some individual founders have retired, passed away, or resettled, others maintain advisory roles, offering guidance and expertise. Despite resettlement often leading to reduced engagement, founders have found ways to remain engaged and to continue support from distance.

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[53] Elisabeth Olivius, 'Displacing equality? Women's participation and humanitarian aid effectiveness in refugee camps' (2014) 33 *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 93, 114, 116.
[54] Ibid.
[55] McConnachie, above n 30, 44.

The RLIs we studied articulated their mission, vision, and values through official documents and websites.[56] These documents serve as a compass and a guiding framework for organisational identity, decision-making, and strategic planning.

Non-refugee involvement in RLI management structures is limited. Camp-based RLIs have a commitment to community leadership. As KWO noted, "For management, every member needs to represent the community in which we provide services. That is why foreigners cannot participate in our management, as they don't represent any of our communities." It is also tricky for RLIs to recruit international volunteers due to the legal status of the RLI and its members. The Karen Refugee Committee- Education Entity (KRC-EE) told us, "We cannot have international volunteers because we are not a legal entity, and we can't help them with visas." There are also challenges to receive camp passes to enter the camps which are issued by the Ministry of the Interior (MOI). Nonetheless a few RLIs engage non-refugee volunteers remotely, mainly for communication and material development tasks requiring English competency.

RLI managed elections: The example of the Karen Women's Organization (KWO)

Every four years, all KWO members from camps and districts come together for an event called 'Congress', where they vote to select the standing committee members at the central level. During the congress, members nominate candidates for the 35 central standing committee positions and conduct anonymous voting. Through multiple rounds of voting, the top 5 candidates are selected for the positions of Chair, Vice Chair, General Secretary, and two joint Secretaries. The top 5 then choose four program coordinators, an auditor, and a treasurer from the 35 elected members of the standing committee. Ultimately, these eleven individuals comprise an executive committee. KWO also holds elections to determine who will be part of the standing committees at the District and Camp level. Central-level elections occur every four years (35 members), district-level elections every three years (15 members), and camp-level elections every two years (21 members).

[56] See the mission and statement of intent of Bangkok Urban Community Club (BUCC) https://www.buccedu.com/

In the urban setting, the situation is quite different. A much smaller group of refugees from over 40 different countries of origin are dispersed across a large city, and often isolated. Bangkok Urban Community Club (BUCC) consults with their community members by "putting an online survey in the community and receiving responses." Being a part of this more diverse community has complications, where individuals may not speak the same language or share a common culture. Yet all of these individuals understand the context and its limitations because they live it. Key informants expressed the view that this shared experience provides greater understanding and legitimacy. This legitimacy provides advantages over international institutions like UNHCR, government agencies, and NGOs who are in a different position of power, do not have the same interests at stake, and are not seen to fully appreciate the everyday lived reality of refugee communities. RLIs shared that they endeavour to achieve an unbureaucratic and flexible structure, continuously improving their services, and remaining responsive to the evolving needs of the communities they serve.

RLI-RLI COLLABORATION

A couple of interesting examples of RLI-RLI collaboration were uncovered through this research. For example, BUCC had a successful joint fundraising experience in which they partnered with Cisarua Refugee Learning Center, an Indonesian-based RLI. The two founders of each RLI were both resettled in Australia and had the opportunity to meet one another in Australia and at congregations of the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) and APNOR. Another example entails existing camp-based RLIs acting as founders or parent organisations for subsequent initiatives. This is exemplified by the Karen Refugee Committee- Education Entity (KRC-EE). Such collaborations highlight the investment and innovation of Camp Committees in diversifying activities and decentralizing among specialists in specific sectors.

THE THAI GOVERNMENT (MOI, PABS, CAMP GENERALS, MILITARY AND POLICING)

The camps are under the administration of MOI. A representative is appointed by the Central Government to oversee the camps, and each camp has one Camp Commander, but as detailed above the main activities are all managed by the elected Camp Committees who run all programs.

Thailand has periodically established Provincial Admission Boards (PABs) made up of representatives of the Ministry of Interior, to screen or verify refugee population numbers flowing in and out of Thailand.[57] The PABs have been established and discontinued and

[57] Vitit Muntarbhorn, 'Refugee Law and Practice in the Asia and Pacific Region: Thailand as a Case study' (2004) *Refugee Law Reader* <http://www.refugeelawreader.org/en/en/english/section-v-asian-framework-for-refugee-protection/v1-protection-challenges-in-asia/core-readings-140/9456-

established again. They have been active and inactive at different times. For example, they were discontinued in 2001 but re-established in 2004. During the gap, thousands arrived but were not registered. From the end of 2006, the PABs functioned sporadically. In 2009, a pilot pre-screening procedure was set up in four camps, led by the Thai authorities with the support of UNHCR, but backlogs formed.[58] A fast-track procedure was set up in 2012, to identify those with existing links to a registered refugee in the camp. Verification exercises were conducted from 2015 and 2019. The most recent infographic from 2023 shows that half (47,024) of the population in the camps remain unregistered from the Thai government/UNHCR perspective.[59] These registration or verification exercises can be seen to be sporadic and impacted by government political interests. When placed next to the constant and consistent registration of the Camp Committees themselves, the accuracy of the government/UNHCR registration exercises pale in comparison to the registration of RLIs governing the camps.

UNHCR

RLIs rely on well-established entities, such as the Thai government, UNHCR, and NGO partners, for various forms of assistance, including funding, expertise, and advocacy. The resources, influence, and capacities of these entities make them critical partners in advancing the goals and objectives of RLIs. For example, KRC noted, "We work with INGOs, local NGOs, civil society, UNHCR, and with Government. We are like a bridge between the camp population and these INGOs and UNHCR."

Some initiatives engage more actively in collaboration with UNHCR than others. Those RLIs that focus on protection, shelter, advocacy, coordination with Thai authorities, and information exchange regarding women, children, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have more regular engagement with UNHCR. RLIs value and benefit from UNHCR support. For example, KWO collaborates with UNHCR "on protection issues of women and children, as UNHCR helps them discuss matters with Thai authorities." KNWO notes that, "UNHCR consults with them on refugee programs, resettlement, women and IDPs."

Concerns were expressed about incidents where there were divergent agendas, instances where UNHCR was perceived as imposing its priorities rather than genuinely respecting the priorities of RLIs. One key informant interview noted, "We tried to reach out to UNHCR for collaboration, but we felt UNHCR have their agenda and they want their

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muntarbhorn-refugee-law-and-practice-in-the-asia-and-pacific-region-thailand-as-a-case-study-1/file.html>.

[58] Yonradee Wangcharoenpaisan, 'Refugee Status Determination (RSD) Practices in Thailand' (Masters Thesis, Thammasat University, 2017) <http://ethesisarchive.library.tu.ac.th/thesis/2017/TU_2017_5966040015_7036_6596.pdf>.

[59] UNHCR, *Thailand Border Operation: RTG/MOI-UNHCR Verified Refugee Population* (31 March 2023) <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/99962>.

agenda to be implemented through us. That is why we didn't engage with UNHCR." If the engagement is seen as unidirectional with UNHCR using RLIs to share information with refugee communities or to extract information, then the engagement is not seen as a true partnership. Concerns were also raised about accessibility of UNHCR, where some key informant interviews shared that, "[UNHCR] don't reach out to [RLIs], and we don't know what they are doing," or, "A few times, we sent emails to UNHCR on how they can work together, but they didn't respond."

An example of a conflict that arose between an RLI and UNHCR involved the provision of educational programming. UNHCR emphasised the provision of free education, while an RLI relied on registration fees to sustain their programs. In another case, an RLI shared that funding from UNHCR involved extensive processes and reporting requirements, without adequate support or flexibility, "We used to receive funding from UNHCR. They required a lot of processes and reporting, but they were not supporting the transportation because they were thinking that they were supporting an illegal act of motivating refugees coming out of camps."

Despite these mixed views, there is a general recognition among RLIs about the crucial role played by UNHCR in supporting refugees in Thailand. The critique is also evidence of the importance of the role that UNHCR is seen to play. BUCC acknowledged, "I understand UNHCR is doing a good job for the purpose they serve. They are doing the work that no other INGOs could do for refugees in Thailand." UNHCR's involvement in protection, consultation on refugee programs, and collaboration on information sharing and resettlements are acknowledged as essential contributions to the refugee community. RLIs value the expertise and resources that UNHCR brings, particularly in navigating complex legal and administrative processes.

Recommendations of RLIs to UNHCR included promoting bi-directional information sharing and joint decision-making processes and ensuring transparency to build trust. RLIs suggested it is crucial that UNHCR invite, listen to, and address concerns raised by communities. Enhanced dialogue and consultation mechanisms can foster a greater understanding of each other's perspectives and ensure that RLI voices are heard and their priorities considered.

OTHER NGOS AND NGO NETWORKS (CCSDPT, TBC, ETC) AND DONORS

A number of other NGOs are also working in and around the camps. The Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT) was formed in 1975 as a communications network for NGOs. CCSDPT is the coordinating committee for 13 NGOs operating in the nine camps.[60] One member of CCSDPT is The Border Consortium

[60] Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED), Thailand Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees

(TBC), which itself has 9 members and is the main provider of food, fuel, shelter and other forms of support.[61] Outside of the camp context there are a number of NGOs working with refugees in an urban context. The Bangkok Asylum Seeker and Refugee Assistance Network (BASRAN) was formed to coordinate the efforts of refugee assisting organizations supporting urban refugees.[62] The Coalition for the Rights of Refugees and Stateless Persons (CRSP) is another joint effort of civil society organizations that includes local NGOs, academics, and lawyers conducting advocacy and working with urban refugees and stateless persons.[63]

RLIs expressed appreciation for true partnership, funding support, logistical support, and consistent and long-standing collaboration. At the same time, RLIs revealed diverse experiences in their interactions with other NGOs, noting the challenges.

One RLI noted, "[some] INGOs have many requirements, and we don't have enough people to do all the administrative works required by those INGOs." One interviewee compared NGO and foundation donors finding that foundations seemed to offer greater flexibility while NGOs often seemed to impose more extensive administrative requirements. Some concerns were also expressed about a lack of co-ownership and co-leadership in their partnership with other NGOs, finding that some decisions are made without involving the RLIs from time to time. One RLI interviewee noted, "Sometimes, partnerships are difficult because [partners] make the decisions without involving us. In such cases, we stop the partnerships with those organisations."

RLIs place great importance on being mission-led and ensuring that partners align with their mission, vision, and values. For example, KRC told us about their partnership approach, "Initially, when an INGO want to do a partnership with us, we share our mission, vision, and values. If they want to partner with us, they must obey our mission and vision; otherwise, we can't proceed. And we always want the programs to be run by refugees." The emphasis on refugee leadership in program implementation is common among respondents to this research.

Foundation (COERR), Ruammit Foundation-DARE Network , Humanity & Inclusion (Handicap International), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), Malteser International, Save the Children (Thailand) Foundation, Shanti Volunteer Association, The Border Consortium (TBC), Women's Education for Advancement and Empowerment (WEAVE), Sermpanya Foundation (SPF).

[61] Act for Peace (AfP), The National Council for Churches of Australia (NCCA), Christian Aid (CA), Church World Service (CWS), DanChurchAid, Diakonia, ICCO Cooperation, Inter Pares, International Rescue Committee (IRC), Norwegian Church Aid.

[62] The Bangkok Asylum Seeker and Refugee Assistance Network (BASRAN) (<https://basranbangkok.wordpress.com/about-2/>) Members include: Bangkok Refugee Center (BRC), Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS), Asylum Access Thailand (AAT), Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN), BPSOS, and a number of churches, grassroots organizations, devoted individuals and refugees themselves.

[63] The Coalition for the Rights of Refugees and Stateless Persons (CRSP) (<https://www.facebook.com/crsp.thailand/about/?ref=page_internal>)

RLIs report challenges if NGOs put pressure on them to comply with specific conditions and requirements. While well-meaning, one respondent shared an experience that they called "demotivating" when "An NGO required them to provide child safeguarding training to all their teachers. Training 1000 teachers is time-consuming, and for that, we have to stop other activities and train our staff despite the fact that our teachers have already signed our code of conduct." The respondent continued, "our donors ask us to create new systems in our organisations for compliance with their requirements despite making our work more difficult." This adds more work rather than easing our burdens. Such pressure can divert resources and add work. Consequently, many RLIs emphasised the importance of carefully considering the benefits of a partnership or funding support. As BUCC noted, "[Donors] can't control our work. If they over ask, I never respond."

BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

INTERNATIONAL AID CUTS

As discussed above, the recent freeze and reduction of humanitarian aid budgets around the world, including the politically-driven abandonment of support by the US under the Trump Administration has initiated a situation of crisis in the camps, one that raised urgent new challenges and hardships for RLIs trying to be resilient in the face of global abandonment and indifference. The situation reduced capacity and escalated risks, barriers, and vulnerabilities among the refugee community in Thailand with resource reduction and staffing lay-offs.

In response to these developments, the Camp Committees quickly mobilized and advocated for policy changes to cope with the aid cuts and contribute to their own well-being through greater self-sufficiency. An Advocacy Statement in February proposed:[64]

- A shift in policy that recognizes the contributions of refugees to Thailand's economy and social fabric and supports their self-sufficiency, especially through access to legal work
- Continuing and strengthened collaboration with Camp Committees to ensure refugee voices in decision-making
- Incremental steps to a more long-term integration pathway
- Collaboration between RLIs, humanitarian partners and Thai authorities at the central, provincial, district, and camp levels

These recommendations have been well-received, with unprecedented changes in policy to cope with the crisis.

[64] The Border Consortium, *Advocacy Statement: Promoting Refugee Independence in Thailand* (27 February 2025) available at: https://www.theborderconsortium.org/news-press/advocacy-statement-promoting-refugee-independence-in-thailand/#

RESOURCING

Resourcing challenges have, therefore, dramatically escalated in 2025, but prior to the most recent fundings cuts, there were ongoing challenges associated with resources. For many years, there has been an informal economy in the camps. From 2015, a system of food cards was established. Until then, it was an in-kind distribution done through communities with big warehouses and teams. After the change, they had cash on a card and enjoyed a much wider selection and greater degree of choice, instead of queuing up for 5-7 items every month. They could shop any day of the week and manage a household budget, with a more diverse and nutritious diet. There are well over 100 vendors across camps, with 65% led by women, all private entrepreneurs, though they work under very strict regulations and are heavily monitored. There are people employed in these shops, builders, those producing vegetables and livestock sold through the shops, and those involved in the logistics of delivery. All of this has established a camp economy. Cooking fuel was still in-kind even after the 2015 change, and as of publication, it is still charcoal as required by the policy of the Thailand National Security Council, but there may be future prospects for this to be added into the food card system. TBC noted, "In no way is the situation desirable or fair, and restriction in the camps has consequences for access to opportunity, yet until recently food security in the camps has remained high against the odds. It is a testament to the Camp Committees and the resilience of the individuals, families, and communities that people are managing to keep up despite the restrictions and environment of deprivation. We should not underestimate the difficulties."[65]

The Karen Women's Organization runs restaurants that draw on resources from local villages and within the camps to fill gaps left by dwindling humanitarian support.[66] The Karen Student Network Group supports refugee students' mental health and well-being by providing art materials; it then sells the artwork and uses the proceeds to help education initiatives in the camps and fund political activism.[67]

A household in the camps will need an income to cover expenses and meet family needs. Some rely on family outside the camps to work and send back a portion of their income. Remittances from diaspora outside Thailand is also important. The challenges of the camp environment are relevant to resourcing RLIs. First, it demonstrates the situation of deprivation in which the RLIs work. It also underscores the challenges for volunteers and staff of RLIs and explains why retention is a challenge. Furthermore, until 2025, Thai policy had not provided work rights for refugees, and many have been forced to work informally to make ends meet. It is yet to become clear how the aid cuts will fully impact economic activities, as new protection gaps emerge and new work opportunities arise.

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[65] Interview with Timothy Moore, The Border Consortium.
[66] Jessica Nancy Bird, 'Bound within Borders or Free as a Bird? Karen Life in Refugee Camps on the Thai–Burma Borderlands' (2021) 36 *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 675, 686.
[67] Ibid, at 687.

VOLUNTEER RETENTION

RLIs all reported heavy dependence on community volunteers. The responses in our research reveal varying numbers of volunteers across RLIs. One camp-based initiative reported a volunteer base of approximately 1000 staff volunteers and 500 management staff volunteers. When cross border community work is included, the membership numbers are in the tens of thousands. All staff working in this initiative serve as volunteers without receiving salaries, except those at the central level who receive stipends. Another camp-based initiative mentioned the presence of 10 volunteers who are provided with transportation, along with over 200 nursery school teachers who receive stipends. The compensation of volunteers depends on the availability of projects and funding. For example, in one camp-based initiative, teachers receive 1000 Baht monthly, medics receive 1,200 to 1,500 Baht per month, and camp staff, who are also the leaders, receive 1,000 to 1,200 Bhat monthly. Effective implementation of programming depends on this volunteer base but is difficult to sustain and is under supported.

GOVERNMENT RESTRICTIONS ON MOVEMENT

Most households in the camps will have someone who is outside of the camps, and it is a big risk for them to travel and to come in and out of the camps. There are gates, and those gates are government controlled. There is a fence demarcating the camps. Despite the challenges, refugees are mobilising to support each other. One respondent shared that, "As the [refugee] students can't go outside [camps], they established this organisation to have the opportunity to work with each other on positive and educational activities."

During a 2019 MOI head count, 4,000 people were identified who had some kind of legal status in Thailand. They were expected to leave the camp as they were deemed not to be in need of support. This is despite the fact that they may be in the camps due to family and community ties. From the perspective of communities and NGOs, a refugee is a refugee, and all are owed support and have a right to family unity, and social rights to be with their community.

It is expected that restrictions on movement will be lifted under the new government policy that will allow refugees from the camps to engage in work. This is a very positive development but will have a number of challenges associated with its smooth implementation. Permits will be applied for and issued, families may be split up with some traveling out of the camps to work and remitting funds back, communication and support services will need to develop along a much more decentralized infrastructure.

PRECONCEPTIONS, ASSUMPTIONS, UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS AND A LACK OF TRUST

As noted above, donors and large institutional actors, particularly at a high-level of the bureaucracy, have at times been suspicious of communities managing the registration themselves. This has resulted in 'verification' exercises, fraud mitigation committees and examiners, or extraordinary distributions, and yet each time the numbers and procedures generated by the Committees are shown to be more accurate than the data that comes out of the slower verification exercises conducted by stakeholders and institutions further from the response. These exercises also can be seen to disrupt the efficient working of the camps, putting an enormous extra burden on the population to satisfy zero tolerance fraud policies by demonstrating that the Committees are doing their utmost to prevent fraud. Still, Camp Committees and other RLIs recognize the value and importance of ensuring the integrity of the response and avoidance of fraud and corruption. It can be concluded that RLIs are held to a very high standard, and regularly duplicating efforts in order to reassure donors, governments, and partners.

RLIs in the camps 'organise and act collectively to try to influence their circumstances' by representing refugees' interests and implementing programming to meet their needs.[68] Activism often places RLIs in a position of conflict with local authorities, humanitarian organisations, and donors, which are 'highly suspicious of the refugee leadership structures'; 'when refugees do not conform to the image of passive victims, void of agency, they are instead perceived as security threats and challenges to host-government and humanitarian control'.[69] Despite pressures to act otherwise, however, numerous humanitarian workers in the camps have made the personal decision to support refugee leadership and 'approaches through which refugees could be treated as people worthy of living with dignity, not merely as lives to be saved'.[70]

[68] Olivius, 'Sites of repression and resistance' above n 30, 299; Shayne Bloomfield-Wong, 'Understanding Karen women's experiences in refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border and in Canada' (thesis, University of Manitoba, 2021).
[69] Olivius, 'Political space in refugee camps' above n 47, 176, 177. See also McConnachie, above n 30, 312-313.
[70] Olivius, 'Political space in refugee camps' above n 47, 184.

CONCLUSION

The history of RLIs in Thailand is a long one, and the scale of the contribution is an impressive model that deserves greater attention and replication elsewhere. The protracted nature of the displacement context, the further deterioration of the security environment in Myanmar, and the current trend towards global abdication of humanitarian support threaten to impose a new level of deprivation and crisis on this resilient population. While the RLIs working in the camp-based context are well-established and high-capacity, they are forced to cope with ongoing conflict in Myanmar, restrictive State policies in Thailand, and a failure of States globally to provide solutions and share responsibility for protection.

There is much that can and should be done to support RLIs in Thailand in both the camp and urban contexts.

- Donors must find ways to sustain life-saving support and improve the sustainability of budgets.
- Advocacy must respond to the current moment of State hostility towards refugees and migrants, and document the consequences of the politicization of protection.
- Operationally, RLIs and the rest of civil society must mobilize to meet the needs of displaced and host communities coping with government neglect and antagonism.
- Governments and donors should find ways to support RLIs inside and outside of the camps in ways that are less disruptive and facilitate greater efficiency and sustainability, based on a realistic assessment of needs identified by RLIs themselves.

Preconceptions and assumptions about refugees as passive recipients of aid and lacking capacity to share in or lead operations are contradicted by the contributions of RLIs in Thailand. The suspicion and lack of trust of RLIs persists but can be effectively refuted by the operational experience of refugee committees demonstrating a model of refugee self-governance.

Many of the challenges that RLIs face in Thailand are related to the protracted nature of the displacement and the lack of durable solutions. There needs to be room for refugees and their supporters to advocate for a more permissive environment, not only for the activities of RLIs but more generally for the rights of refugees in Thailand.

Greater support for camp and urban RLIs and their engagement in the design and delivery of policies and practices will not only lead to greater self-sufficiency but will also contribute to a more effective and sustainable response, contributing directly to meaningful responsibility sharing globally.

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