

| Learning Together

Advancing Alternatives for Children

Five years of the regional peer learning platform and program of action on alternatives to the detention of children in the context of migration in Asia Pacific

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Immigration detention causes significant harm to all individuals who are detained, as well as their families and communities. While this is true even for short periods of detention, often people remain in detention for long periods of time, compounding harm. Children are particularly vulnerable given they are still growing and developing, and it can lead to lifelong physical, mental, and psychosocial impacts.

In the Asia Pacific region thousands of children are held in immigration detention every year. Increasingly there is a desire from governments and civil society to stop this damaging practice.

The region has seen promising developments over the past five years, including high-level political commitments to end child detention, the release of children and their families from detention into community-based alternatives, and improved systems that prevent child detention in the first place.

The Regional Peer Learning Platform and Program of Action on Alternatives to the Detention of Children in the Context of Migration in Asia Pacific (the Platform) was established in 2019 to encourage and support precisely this momentum.

The Platform is co-convened by the International Detention Coalition (IDC) and the Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM) Secretariat, and brings together key actors from government, civil society, academia, and international organisations across Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand, and Thailand.

Platform participants come together to share promising practices, to support each other through challenges, and learn new strategies to develop and implement rights-based, community-oriented Alternatives to Detention (ATD) for children and their families.

In 2024 the Platform’s co-convenors initiated a review to identify the impact of the Platform over the past five years and also key elements of design that enabled this impact. This report documents this process, hoping to serve as a resource both for participants to reflect on achievements, and for anyone interested in replicating this model in different contexts.

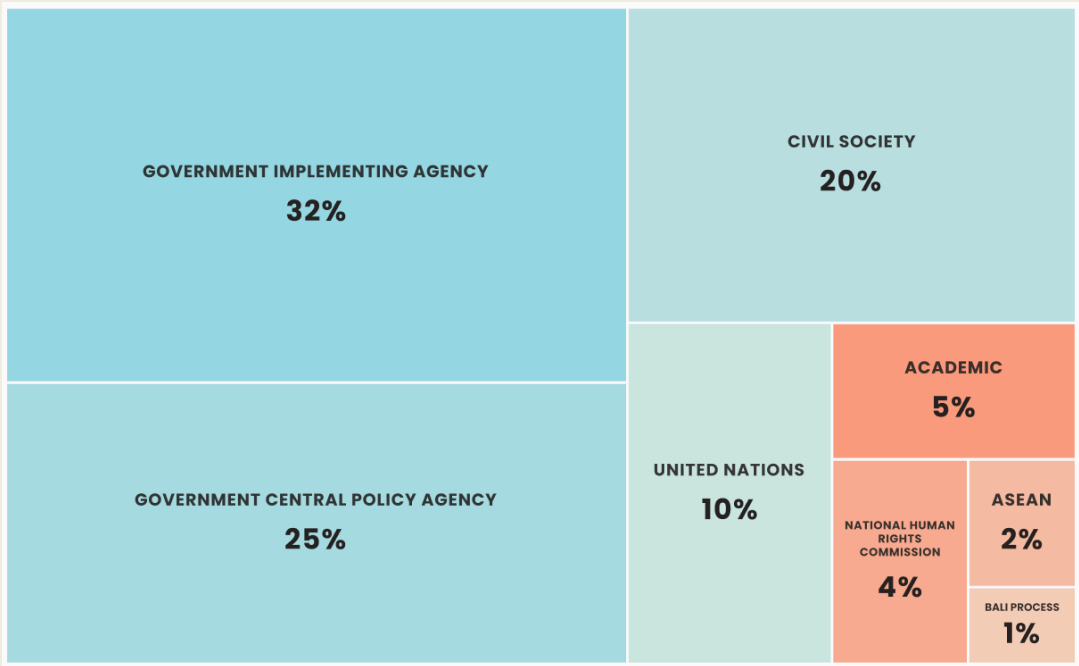


Figure 1: Percentage of participants per type of organisation

Since 2019, the Platform has convened seven times, **reaching over 157 individuals**. Of these individuals, **69 people have attended more than once**. Participants attend from a range of organisations reflecting the need to address policy and programmatic responses using a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach. This report identifies four key outcomes that the Platform has significantly contributed toward:

- **Building collective momentum to progress national reform:** The Platform has brought together diverse stakeholders, enabling knowledge-sharing and collaboration, which in turn drove policy changes and strengthened national efforts to adopt community-based ATD.
- **Developing policy champions:** By identifying and empowering key individuals inside and outside government, the Platform has fostered leaders who actively develop more humane and rights-based migration policies and practices and help to implement ATD reforms within their respective national contexts.
- **Widening space for collaboration between government and civil society:** The Platform has created an environment where governments and civil society organisations can engage more openly, building trust and working together to shape migration policies that respect human rights.

- **Enhancing regional collaboration:** Through cross-country learning and peer exchanges, the Platform has strengthened regional cooperation, aligning national reforms with broader international frameworks like the Global Compact for Migration and the ASEAN Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration.

The report also identifies **five key elements of design** that underpinned the Platform's success:

- **Convening in partnership:** benefiting from the complementary expertise of IDC and the ADFM;
- **Intentional participant selection:** ensuring a diverse mix of government, civil society, academic and international organisations to foster inclusive discussions;
- **Creating the right enabling environment:** including safe spaces for open and honest dialogue under the Chatham House Rule;
- **Incorporating site visits and lived experience:** allowing participants to engage with real-world ATD programs and human stories; and
- **Careful agenda design:** balancing structured sessions with flexible discussions to encourage creativity and meaningful collaboration.

While the Platform has achieved significant success, it has also faced several **challenges** including designing agendas that are relevant for diverse national contexts, maintaining engagement between meetings, resource constraints and sustainability, and meaningful and safe inclusion of lived experience leaders.

Based on the lessons learned in this report, the Platform is poised to continue facilitating bilateral visits and regional collaboration, with a focus on deepening relationships and sharing best practices across borders. Plans are underway to hold the next Platform meeting in Australia in 2025, providing an opportunity to explore Australia's recent ATD practices and social cohesion strategies.

The Platform's success in the Asia Pacific region has received positive attention beyond the region. Lessons learned will be instrumental in supporting the establishment of a similar platform in Europe, and in informing cross-regional collaboration.

The Platform has demonstrated the power of collaborative, region-wide efforts in advancing ATD for children in migration contexts. It serves as a model for similar initiatives globally, and its continued evolution will be crucial in shaping more humane and effective migration policies in the future. We hope this report is a useful document to those interested in the method of peer learning and also to ATD policy and practitioners.



| Introduction

REGIONAL CONTEXT OF ALTERNATIVES TO DETENTION

Immigration detention represents one of the worst human rights breaches of our time. Through its ongoing use, people on the move are deprived of their liberty in often substandard conditions. Many remain ‘in limbo’ for months or years while awaiting processing of their cases or deportation.

People experiencing immigration detention can experience permanent psychological and physical consequences. These negative impacts are demonstrably worse for children, whose physical and mental wellbeing is severely harmed in detention settings. The detention of children and their families not only leads to long-term harm but is also expensive and an ineffective deterrent. Fortunately there are proven systems that can work in place of immigration detention; namely rights-based and community ‘Alternatives to Detention’ (ATD) systems.

In the Asia Pacific region many countries continue to use immigration detention as a de facto measure for migration management. Importantly, in recent years there has been significant momentum in ending child immigration detention and developing community-based ATD in a number of countries.

As a result, several countries in the region now either do not detain children in practice, or have introduced policies to restrict the use of detention for children and their families. An increasing number of governments have also been working with civil society to develop and strengthen community-based ATD based on case management. It is with this background in mind that the Platform was established to foster continued positive progress across the region.

HISTORY OF THE PLATFORM

Establishment

The International Detention Coalition (IDC) and Secretariat of the Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM), led by the Centre for Policy Development (CPD), launched the Regional Peer Learning Platform and Program of Action on Alternatives to the Detention of Children in the Context of Migration in Asia Pacific (the Platform) in 2019.¹

¹ IDC is the world’s leading network dedicated to ending immigration detention. We are a global coalition, uniting civil society organisations, community groups and individuals working to end immigration detention and promote non-custodial, rights-based alternatives to detention (ATD). CPD is an independent policy institute based in Sydney, Melbourne and Jakarta that seeks a fair, sustainable society and wellbeing economy that serves current and future generations in Australia and Southeast Asia. For more information about these two organisations, please see the ‘About’ page at the end of this report.

The Platform facilitates the sharing of positive practice, challenges, and concrete examples of what is working in the development and implementation of ATD for children in the region, towards immigration policy reform and ending immigration detention.

The Platform takes a human rights-based approach to ATD, emphasising the implementation of community-based ATD models that engage migrants and refugees in the decision-making process, ensuring that their rights are respected throughout and that the dignity and rights of individuals are at the forefront of any ATD strategy, aligning with international human rights standards.

The idea for the Platform was raised and discussed at the 7th and 8th meetings of the ADFM in 2018 and 2019, where the proposal gained support among participants, and funding was secured. The Platform brings together individuals from policy and implementing agencies in the governments of Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand and Thailand, as well as civil society, academics and international organisations. All Platform meetings are held under Chatham House Rule of non-attribution, and endeavour to have continuity of participation over time, with the goal of building trust and collaborative relationships among participants. The format and agenda of the Platform is flexible and responsive to participants' priorities and needs.

The participating countries all expressed interest in joining the Platform during the ADFM meetings of 2018–19, based on their own national policy priorities. At the time, Malaysia and Thailand both hosted high numbers of refugees and were at different stages in the journey to introduce comprehensive ATD systems. By contrast, Australia and Indonesia had more developed ATD systems for children, but still faced challenges in their wider migration systems. New Zealand was not involved in the Platform's initial meeting but requested to be included in subsequent sessions in recognition of the value of the peer learning and engagement opportunities offered by the Platform.

The original purpose of the Platform was to:

- Leverage and build on the momentum of emerging positive practices in the region by facilitating knowledge exchange on policy options to end immigration detention, especially for children.
- Establish a collaborative, multi-stakeholder platform that fosters ongoing engagement between governments, civil society, inter-governmental, and faith-based organisations for ATD reform.
- Provide targeted support to governments by enabling them to learn from peer experiences and apply proven solutions from similar contexts to their own challenges.

- Promote the development of practical, community-based ATD, ensuring alignment with international frameworks like the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) and the ASEAN Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration.

Meetings 2019–2024

The Platform met for the first time in November 2019 in Bangkok on the thirtieth anniversary of the Convention of the Rights of the Child. That meeting took place over two days, with a full-day site visit to learn from schools and communities implementing ATD on the outskirts of Bangkok. Interpreters were organised so that all participants could contribute equally. At the end of that meeting participants identified that similar roundtables, study tours and secondments would all be valuable contributions of the Platform in the future.

Shortly after that first meeting, the Platform had to adapt online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead of two-day meetings, over the next two years convenors held two-hour, virtual meetings on specific areas of interest like mainstreaming child protection, case management practices, access to education, and effective collaboration between government and civil society. In addition to these meetings involving all five countries, convenors also facilitated bilateral consultations in which participants had the opportunity to explore particular issues in more detail (ie. between Australia and Thailand; Indonesia and Thailand etc). Convenors found the format still worked well online. This was further underlined by high rates of attendance and engagement from participants, although some noted it did lack the same level of relationship-building as the in-person session.

In November 2022, convenors held the Platform's first in-person, post-pandemic meeting in Putrajaya, Malaysia, focusing on monitoring and evaluation and meaningful lived experience engagement. A subsequent meeting was held in Jakarta in February 2024 looking at whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to implementing ATD. Outside of the in-person regional meetings, knowledge and experience sharing, the Platform also facilitates bilateral engagement and national-level dialogue, and provides advice and technical assistance to support policy-makers and inspire change.

REPORT PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

IDC and the ADFM Secretariat have developed this report with the aim to better understand and document the Platform's outcomes to date, inform the future direction of this forum and record applicable lessons which could be useful in other policy contexts or locations.

The **key evaluation questions** guiding the development of the report were:

- To what extent has the Platform improved outcomes for ATD reform and regional collaboration?
- What are the key enablers of the peer learning model that assist national ATD reform and regional collaboration?

The **methodology** used to develop this report included both a judgemental approach² and a utilisation-focused approach.³ Convenors used a survey and reflection exercise with participants from the Jakarta 2024 Platform meeting and semi-structured interviews with over 20 participants from a variety of countries, agencies, and years of involvement. Subject matter experts also reviewed drafts of this report. Unfortunately, convenors were not able to interview people with lived experience of detention as part of this learning report. The meaningful engagement of lived experience leaders is explored in more detail in Part Three of the report below.

The report is based primarily on qualitative data and thus may be influenced by personal biases, perspectives, and experiences of those involved. The nature of long-term policy change means that assessing impact is intrinsically challenging. In this case there was limited quantitative data available which could provide more objective, measurable, and statistically significant evidence to generalise the findings broadly or to quantify the exact impact of the program. As such, the conclusions drawn in this report are robust but should be viewed as suggestive rather than conclusive, reflecting the insights and experiences of the participants.

The report is divided into four parts. Part One summarises "key outcomes" in response to the first evaluation question. Part Two summarises "key elements of design" in response to the second evaluation question. Part Three explores challenges and Part Four discusses how these findings will shape the future of the Platform.

² Judgmental approaches focus on assessing the value or worth of the Platform based on the standards set at the beginning. This approach involves making qualitative judgments about the effectiveness and overall impact of the Platform, using expert opinions and evaluation interviews to determine whether the objectives have been met.

³ Utilisation-focused approaches prioritise the needs of the primary users of the evaluation findings, namely the convenors of and participants in the Platform. This method emphasises engaging stakeholders throughout the process to ensure the findings are relevant, practical, and directly applicable to decision-making needs. The goal is to produce actionable insights that will be used to improve the Platform and make informed decisions about its future.



PART 1

Outcomes Achieved

The Platform has improved outcomes for ATD reform and regional collaboration

The Platform has made significant progress towards realising its initial objectives, namely improved outcomes for ATD reform and greater regional collaboration. This has been achieved by facilitating space that allows relationships to build, supporting cross sector collaboration and influencing how the issue of ATD for children is framed within governments. The learning report uncovered a number of outcomes that were both intended and unintended, and convenors have adapted their strategy accordingly to ensure these outcomes are embedded within the program strategy going forward.

Outcomes identified in review	Corresponding objective from platform conception	Summary of progress
Key Outcome 1: Building collective momentum to progress national reform	Leverage and build on current momentum of emerging positive practices in the region by facilitating knowledge exchange on policy options to end immigration detention, especially for children.	The Platform has been instrumental in building collective momentum for national reform by fostering trust and collaboration across government agencies, civil society, and other stakeholders. Through knowledge exchange and relationship-building, participants have developed stronger personal and institutional connections, leading to enhanced cooperation and alignment of goals. These relationships have inspired national-level reforms and helped create a unified approach to advancing rights-based ATD.
Key Outcome 2: Developing policy champions	Provide targeted support to governments by enabling them to learn from peer experiences and apply proven solutions from similar contexts to their own challenges.	The Platform has been instrumental in developing government and non-government ATD leaders by identifying and nurturing individuals who develop innovative ATD reforms within their own governments or institutions. Through targeted support, these champions have enhanced their knowledge, built peer networks, and strengthened collaboration with civil society, academics and international partners. This process has empowered them to develop more humane migration practices and phase out the immigration detention of children, in alignment with the original objective of enabling governments to learn from peer experiences and apply proven solutions.

LEARNING TOGETHER

Key Outcome 3: Widening of space for collaboration between government and civil society

Establish a collaborative, multi-stakeholder platform that fosters ongoing engagement between governments, civil society, inter-governmental, and faith-based organisations for ATD reform.

The Platform has successfully widened space for collaboration between governments and civil society by fostering deeper relationships, increasing trust and breakdown stereotypes. Government officials now better understand the value of civil society's role in migration policy, with many noting improved communication and a greater willingness to consult civil society in decision-making processes. Civil society representatives gained credibility and influence, and a better appreciation of government ways of working, enabling more meaningful participation in policy reform.

Key Outcome 4: Building momentum for regional collaboration

Promote the development of practical, community-based ATD solutions, ensuring alignment with international frameworks like the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) and the ASEAN Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration.

The Platform has successfully enhanced regional collaboration by creating a unique space for mid-level public servants and civil society to engage across borders on common ATD challenges. This collaboration has allowed participants to exchange practical knowledge and strategies, informing internal government briefs and providing regional context in decisions. The cross-country learning has helped to align national reforms with broader regional and international frameworks, such as ASEAN Declarations and the Global Compact for Migration, fulfilling the original objective of fostering ATD reform momentum across the Asia Pacific region.



KEY OUTCOME 1: BUILDING COLLECTIVE MOMENTUM TO PROGRESS NATIONAL REFORM

Delivering effective community and rights-based ATD requires a collaborative, “whole-of-government” or “whole-of-society” approach. This means that all levels of government, civil society, academics, UN agencies, people with lived experience and migrant and refugee-led organisations, the private sector and community work together towards shared objectives.

In practice, this often requires central government agencies (such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Security Council, Treasury/Finance, Home Affairs) working hand in hand with implementing agencies (such as departments of immigration and of children, youth and families), sharing information and expertise. This work can also benefit greatly from the evidence base and expertise of academics, and the practical expertise in on-the-ground implementation that civil society often brings. No one government or agency can do this work alone, and civil society also has a responsibility to support government in implementing effective ATD.

“From the meetings, I saw clearly the landscape of national advocacy. The forum helped us quite a lot in identifying the national allies and targets to nurture a commitment and alliance to work further together. We took Inspiration from the Platform to do more at the national level.”

– Indonesia, civil society representative

Platform participants emphasised that “whole-of-society” approaches require trust and strong relationships across the board. When individuals from different institutions form personal connections they are more likely to share information, align their goals, and work well together towards common objectives. These relationships also make it easier to resolve conflicts and navigate bureaucratic hurdles, leading to more efficient and effective institutional cooperation.

Platform participants repeatedly stated this form of relationship-building was a significant benefit of the Platform. Participants had the space to interact with each other in formal and informal settings, often over a number of days and outside of their day-to-day professional lives (either by way of travel to a new country or committing to full-day meetings and dinners). These relationships often translated back to the day-to-day context and supported greater collaboration and collective momentum towards reform.



Case study: A sense of teamwork

Thailand's pledge to end the immigration detention of children at the UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants in 2016 sparked significant progress. Since 2019, Thailand has implemented ATD for children in a migration context, been recognised as an "ATD Champion Country" and made commitments under the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) to effectively implement ATD measures for migrant children and to strengthen the National Screening Mechanism (NSM) for people in need of international protection. Other commitments include increasing access to education and healthcare, withdrawing Thailand's reservation to Article 22 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and promoting positive perception toward migrants.

The Platform meetings have constructively engaged Thailand in driving this policy development by supporting and building a 'Thailand team' of individuals from multiple agencies committed to exchanging good practices, sharing challenges and engaging with partner countries. Thai participants formed a bond during their participation in Platform meetings which continued when they returned to Thailand. This was visible in ongoing relationships, which continue to enable whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches to happen much more naturally.

A good example of this in action was the coordinated preparation and follow up of the Thai team before and after the Jakarta 2024 Platform meeting. The multi-agency team from the Thai government, UN and civil society met beforehand to set expectations, dividing

roles and responsibilities in preparing their presentation. From the Jakarta meeting there were several ideas that the Thai participants identified as useful to improve ATD policy and practices in Thailand. These were then progressed upon their return. In particular the Department of Children and Youth (DCY) led the revision of the MOU-ATD's Standard Operation Procedures, identified the cost of childcare under the ATD programme as evidence to allocate a budget to support the programme, and explored the possibility of expanding community-based ATD to vulnerable migrant children. It was during the Platform meeting itself that DCY worked closely with the Immigration Bureau, supported by NSC, MOI, MOFA, UN agencies, and civil society organisations, to progress these reforms. Another example is from the Immigration Bureau officials, who came up with the idea of developing a case management and interpreter system under the National Screening Mechanism during the Jakarta Platform meeting. The Immigration Bureau then approached HOST International, also present at the meeting, to work side by side to design a plan to develop these systems.

Thailand's interventions showed how the Thai participants from different backgrounds collaborate at both policy and implementation level towards the big picture of Thailand's protection system for people in a migration context. During site visits and breaks, Thai participants spent time together, sharing their views, reflecting on what they had learned from the Platform and strategising ways to collaborate, improve, and progress reform nationally. Another benefit is that when participants return to their offices and agencies, they more easily share their experiences and relationships built from the Platform meetings with other colleagues that were not in attendance. This sense of teamwork is a significant step to creating a sustainable movement towards implementing ATD policy change at the national level.

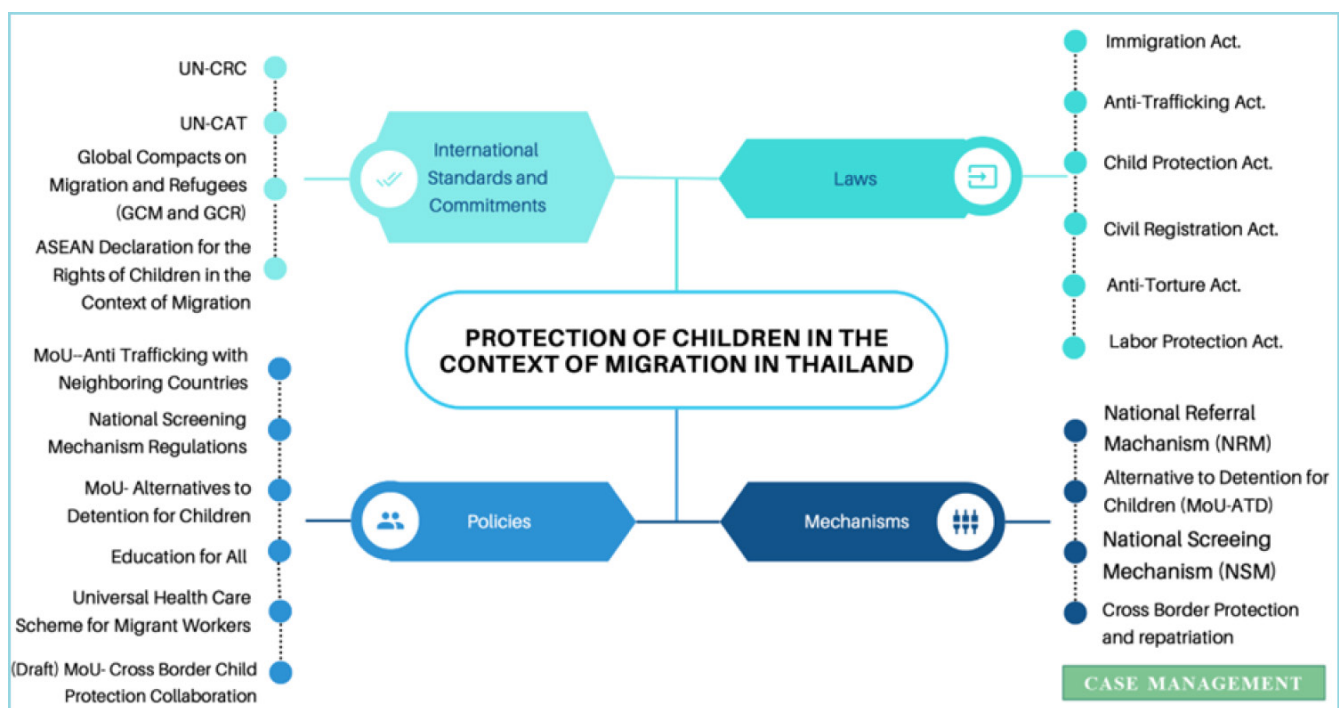


Figure 2: Example of a slide from the Thai presentation at the Jakarta 2024 Platform meeting showing the big picture of Thailand's protection system for children in a migration context

KEY OUTCOME 2: DEVELOPING POLICY CHAMPIONS

"The Platform really opened my mind, because there were no other resources available on how to do this, but it was my task."

– Malaysian civil servant

Like any large institution, governments are composed of numerous departments, branches, levels and agencies, each with their own roles and responsibilities. Navigating these internal dynamics can be very challenging, and is even harder for those outside the government to understand. Thus internal institutional leaders play an important role in creating conditions and building momentum for innovative approaches within government, and in helping these approaches navigate through the bureaucracy.

Building policy champions involves identifying, nurturing, and empowering individuals or groups with expertise and confidence to lead specific initiatives or reforms. The Platform convenors identified potential ATD champions in respective countries and organisations, and then worked closely with them individually and in groups to advance their ATD knowledge and skills.

"Internally it was very hard to get traction on the issue, so having the international aspect was helpful."

– Australian civil servant

By fostering enthusiasm and a culture of collaboration, champions are able to inspire change and connect with those inside and outside their institutions who are equally dedicated to progressing ATD policy and practice. Importantly there are also many champions from civil society organisations, academics and UN agencies that can support or drive ATD policy reform side by side with government counterparts. The Platform gives an opportunity for the champions to meet new peers and support them in realising that they are not working on these issues alone.



Case study: Development of ATD Pilot in Malaysia

The journey to implement ATD for children in Malaysia has been ongoing for over 12 years. Initial responsibility for this policy area sat with the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM) which attempted to handle the issue despite limited resources, poorly defined roles and the misalignment of responsibilities among relevant ministries.

At the time of the first Platform meeting in November 2019, there was already some momentum in Malaysia. In July of that year the Minister of KPWKM and Deputy Prime Minister at the time – Dr Wan Azizah – had said publicly that “Children do not belong at depots and should not be detained for immigration offences as long as there is a better alternative”. Malaysian Government officials from KPWKM, the Immigration Department and the Department of Social Welfare attended the first meeting of the Platform. At the time, it was seen as a rare opportunity where Malaysia was under no pressure to share and could learn from other countries’ experiences.

Upon returning from the Platform meeting, a relatively mid-level policy officer was inspired to draft a Cabinet Paper for an ATD pilot for children. This paper drew on the example from Thailand of the seven ministry MOU, and proposed involving multiple ministries in the Malaysian pilot, including the National Security Council (NSC) and Home Affairs, and civil society implementing partners SUKA Society and Yayasan Chow Kit.

The idea to prepare a Cabinet Paper was strategic as this process requires response from all other ministries, including NSC and Home Affairs. The response was prepared after some negotiation and compromise – including stipulations about the pilot not applying to children of certain ethnicities, and repatriation as the only case resolution option.⁴ Eventually in April 2021 Cabinet signed off on the idea of the ATD pilot, and Standard Operating Procedures followed in December 2021. The pilot was officially launched in February 2022.

Unfortunately, challenges have persisted, and the pilot has still not been implemented. However, the pilot remains a key milestone in Malaysia and has shaped the ongoing ATD work. Civil society has continued their strategic advocacy by leveraging the established processes of the pilot, the relationships formalised between civil society and the government, and Malaysia’s national, regional, and international commitments to implement the ATD pilot.

⁴ See: Kamar Khas (Special Chamber), Malaysia Parliamentary Debates, 14th Parliament, Fourth-Term, Second Meeting, 8 Dec 2021; and Question 104, Oral Answers, 14th Parliament, Fifth-Term, Second Meeting, 4 Aug 2022.

KEY OUTCOME 3: WIDENING OF SPACE FOR COLLABORATION BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY

The expertise required to design effective migration management systems that embed human rights for all are wide-ranging and distinct from the technical forms of expertise usually required to make policy. Government must look beyond the public sector to build collaborative relationships with a range of people, institutions, organisations and communities.

The Platform represents an example of how intergovernmental collaboration with civil society, UN and academic representatives improves policy and practise for children impacted by immigration detention. The diverse collaborations forged throughout the Platform have contributed to more diverse input into policy-making, which ultimately results in stronger and more evidence-based policy. Many civil society representatives noted the most significant change for them was the ability to be taken seriously by public servants and subsequently normalise collaboration and trust.

"It feels like it gives more weight for civil society to engage with the government. We are taken more seriously, seen as a bigger player to government as we are recognised by regional and international actors which helps strengthen our credibility."

– Indonesia, civil society representative

Many government representatives noted that the Platform helped them identify trusted individuals in civil society to collaborate with, and nurtured an alliance to work together outside of the Platform. Some officials felt they could more readily 'pick up the phone' and call civil society they had met and ask for advice on decisions they needed to make quickly in the policy making process.

Feedback also indicated that the inclusion of academics in the Platform added a further element of authority to the ideas being put forward. Academics could help to bridge gaps between research and evidence, and policy development, and brought refreshing perspectives to the table.

Furthermore, many policy officials noted that site visits allowed them to better understand the reality of the situation on the ground, both for migrants experiencing the implementation of policy decisions, and civil society implementers. They noted that it humanised the problem for them, helping them recognise the importance of consulting with affected groups for good policy-making.

Case study: Indonesian education and livelihoods

While Indonesia has largely managed to phase out the immigration detention of children, significant challenges in its refugee and migrant protection policies remain, including around access to education and livelihoods. Significant reform in Indonesia to address this has been led by national government, UN and civil society representatives that met and formed relationships at the Platform meetings.

During the pandemic, Platform meetings moved to be held online. Rather than slowing momentum, this in fact inspired significant local initiatives in Indonesia. Partly motivated by the need to report back positive progress to the Platform, the Indonesian group organised a series of national-level sessions in 2022 and 2023 to coordinate advocacy around refugee policy. This initiative was led by BRIN (National Research and Innovation Agency), with support from Jesuit Refugee Service, IOM, UNHCR, and UNICEF. The sessions took the form of monthly online workshops conducted over six months with government and non-government stakeholders to develop a policy brief for submission to the Indonesian National Taskforce on Refugees.

In 2022, this workshop focused on strengthening access to education for refugee children, responding to continued deficiencies in this field despite positive policy attempts from the Government. The policy brief proposed actionable strategies to ensure education access as part of the Presidential Decree No. 125/2016, which governs the treatment and rights of refugees in Indonesia.

As a result of this coordinated work, the Second Letter from the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education and Culture was issued to regional education offices in all provinces so that refugee children have the opportunity to participate in formal schooling. Although it remains a challenge; especially at the level of implementation, this nonetheless demonstrates notable progress at the policy level.

In 2023 the workshops focused on access to livelihoods for refugees, and developing sustainable solutions for refugee empowerment, enhancing economic opportunities as an alternative to traditional resettlement. The resulting policy brief was submitted to the National Taskforce on Refugees, which was at the time, working to revise the Presidential Decree. The result of this work was the issuance of a circular to job training centres in the local regions that refugees can utilise the centres with a financial guarantee from the authorities.

The ongoing revision of Presidential Decree No. 125/2016 presents an important opportunity for improving refugee policies in Indonesia. The policy briefs from the 2022 and 2023 discussion series provide valuable insights and recommendations that could significantly influence the revised decree. By incorporating these recommendations, Indonesia has the potential to enhance its approach to refugee management, ensuring better educational

opportunities and economic empowerment. These efforts not only align with international standards but also demonstrate Indonesia's commitment to humane and sustainable solutions for refugees within its borders.

KEY OUTCOME 4: BUILDING MOMENTUM FOR REGIONAL COLLABORATION

Regional collaboration on migration is essential due to the complex and transnational nature of migration challenges in the region. Migration policies and challenges in one country often have direct implications on their neighbours, and lessons learned in one context may be transferable to another.

While inter-regional dialogues exist in our region, they are often at senior official or ministerial level. This Platform has filled a gap by specifically targeting mid-level public servants, creating a unique space for them to engage directly with counterparts across the region, and with civil society. These practitioners were able to establish common ground and share practical ideas – such as how to frame complex issues with their ministers, how to establish child protection frameworks in practice and navigate complex bureaucracies to encourage reform.

Participants often commented that they would rarely have exposure to such discussions, however they frequently used the information and connections obtained in the meetings to inform their work and briefings within their ministries. The impact of this is better informed internal briefings that are also alive to the regional context, and can draw from what is working elsewhere. Many government participants noted their increased ability to encourage policy change internally by using examples and insight gained from other countries at the Platform. This was emphasised in the ASEAN nations as governments were particularly interested in how to manage migration flows within similar contexts.

“One of the biggest shifts from the Platform was to convince the security agency to be involved. Once they realised it was led by these agencies in other countries, they realised this was not just something to appease child rights. If it is how our neighbours are doing it, we take it seriously.”

– Malaysian civil servant

Furthermore, the Platform fostered increased dialogue and engagement by facilitating bilateral visits and strengthening ties among public servants and civil society. Participants have recognised that they face similar issues and needs, leading to a broader perspective on how to frame and address migration challenges. This sense of commonality fosters an environment conducive to mobilising regional actors around ASEAN regional guidelines and other collaborative efforts.

Case study: Bilateral discussions

Alongside the regular regional meetings, the Platform has also supported bilateral discussion and visits among participating governments. A testament to the Platform's intention of furthering dialogue and learning amongst governments, these bilateral discussions were initiated by participants themselves, who sought a deeper understanding of topics explored during the Platform meeting.

Three such meetings on ATD have been held to date:

- The first was held online between the Governments of Thailand and Australia and focused on Australia's experience mainstreaming child wellbeing and protection across government departments.
- The second was also online between Indonesia and Thailand and exchanged lessons from Thailand's ATD operations and larger rights frameworks available to migrant and refugee children and Indonesia's policies on access to education.
- The third was in person between Malaysia and Thailand, again exchanging lessons from each country's experience with ATD, and exploring applicability of community placement and case management programs in the respective contexts. This exchange also created a rare opportunity for collaboration between Malaysian civil society and Thai Government officials working at the border to assist with the safe return of Thai children from Malaysia, including the potential role of case management and foster care systems. This connection has opened up avenues of cross-border collaboration which can support effective migration case management between the two countries.

The bilateral discussions demonstrate clear interest from policy-makers in greater learning sparked from regional discussions. In some cases these bilateral conversations even led to in-person study visits, including with higher-level policy makers and some ministers themselves. These study visits provided an opportunity for governments to build on discussions at the Platform and subsequent bilateral meetings, creating more tailored space to discuss approaches to national and regional policy reform.



REACH OF THE PLATFORM

Over the past five years the Platform has worked with over 157 key individuals across the Asia Pacific involved in ending immigration detention for children in the context of migration

Since 2019, the Platform has convened seven times, reaching **over 157 individuals**. Of these individuals, **69 people have attended more than once**.

The following graph demonstrates the ratio of participants per organisation type over all meetings:

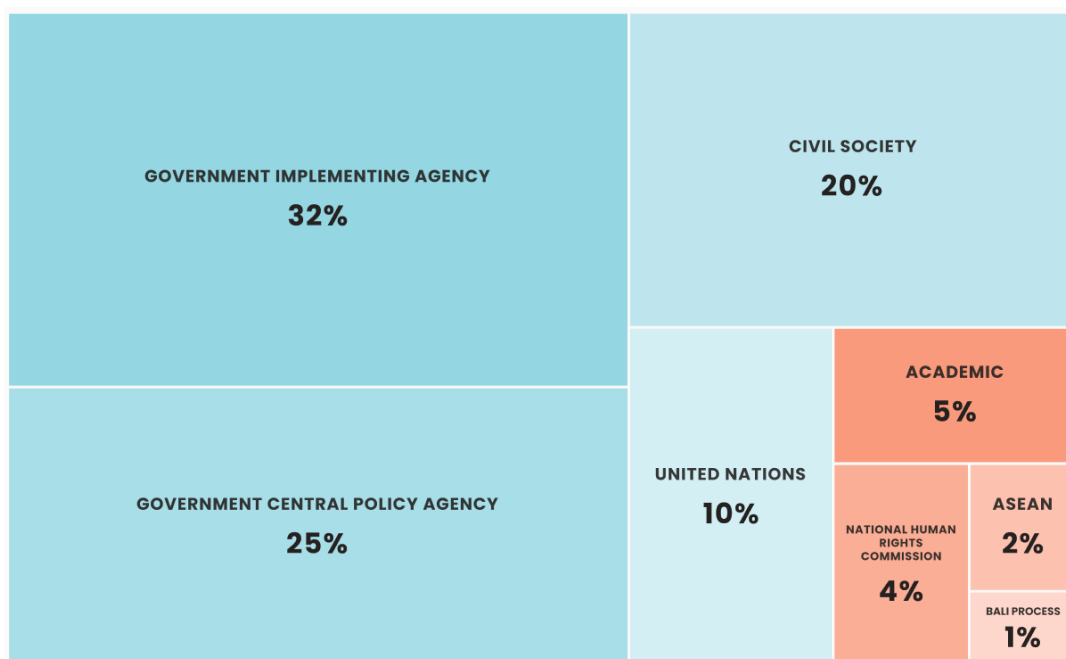
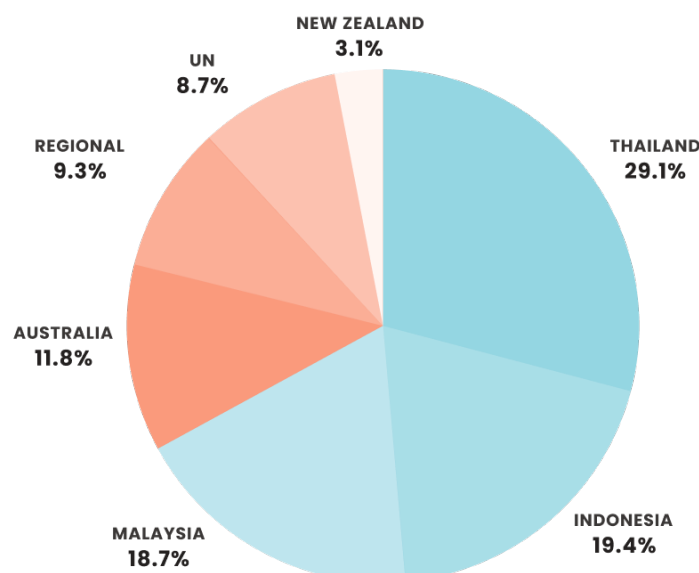


Figure 1: Percentage of participants per type of organisation

This graph represents the ratio of participants per country (including stakeholders from all types of organisations):





PART 2

Key Elements of Design



Interviews identified five elements of design that were considered most important for the success of the Platform.

These elements were identified by the convenors and participants alike. These elements are important regardless of whether the meeting was convened online or in-person. However it was clear that a key impact of the Platform as described above was relationship-building, which can be done most effectively in-person. Many of the below elements were enabled at least in part by the flexibility of the two convening organisations, who were able to operate flexibly without the constraints under which some larger international or inter-governmental organisations operate.

ELEMENT 1: CONVENING IN PARTNERSHIP

The constructive partnership between IDC and CPD has been a crucial part of the success of the Platform. Not only were the two organisations able to share resources and capacity, but they also each brought distinct expertise and complementary skills to the running of the Platform. IDC are subject matter experts on ATD and have in-depth national-level knowledge of the countries participating, in addition to international networks and examples from other regions. CPD brings expertise in convening high-level dialogues, familiarity with existing approaches to managing forced migration, and a substantial regional network of high-level policy makers. Involving academic experts from the ADFM Secretariat also enabled organisers to draw on their advice and expertise when designing the agenda and in facilitation. The strength of IDC and CPD's partnership can also be attributed to trusted relationships, good and frequent communication, and strong planning and coordination mechanisms, in which both organisations invested.

At a practical level, IDC and the ADFM Secretariat collectively have staff based in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, which was important for relationship building, briefing participants ahead of meetings and following up with participants after meetings. Utilising in-person networks was far more effective than relying on virtual connectivity to build crucial relationships.

ELEMENT 2: BEING INTENTIONAL ABOUT WHO IS IN THE ROOM

Many interviewees commented on this element. Having the 'right' mix of people in the room for sensitive discussions is critical. To achieve this the convenors were very intentional about who was invited within each ministry, department or organisation and strict on the sessions being invitation-only. This ensured that everyone attending was doing so in a spirit of constructive engagement and was solutions-oriented. Important elements include:

- **Diversity of participants:** participants are drawn from a mix of government, UN, civil society, academia, national human rights institutions and regional bodies like ASEAN. Within government departments, convenors invited a mix of policy and practice agencies; whoever has carriage over elements of ATD implementation. Many of these individuals work on the same issues but don't get a chance to interact often. Involving academics was also raised by many interviewees as a unique added value of this Platform, as they can bring a different perspective and strong evidence-base to discussions. Across the board, convenors were very intentional about inviting people and organisations who are constructive and solutions-oriented.
- **Numbers in the room:** To enable open dialogue it is important to limit the number of people who can sit around the table. Analysis of the seven meetings held to date found an average of 41 participants per meeting, including convenors and advisers. It can be challenging to cap numbers, given the breadth of stakeholders who are interested in attending these discussions. Being very clear from the outset about who you are targeting helps to manage expectations. Convenors only invite one representative per organisation, and maintain a balance of representation across countries. Further, invitations target those who have expertise and influence at the national level, rather than regionally or globally. Convenors are also explicit that the main stakeholders of the forum are government participants, as they have the most influence on policy reform in this space.
- **Level of seniority:** This work intentionally targets mid-level policy or 'desk' officers and implementers, rather than senior decision-makers. That is because the Platform needs to be informed by those working at the nexus of policy and implementation, to properly understand where the barriers and opportunities are. Other forums exist for more senior level policy discussion, but it is far rarer for mid-level bureaucrats working at the heart of national reform to come together with their counterparts in this way. As participants advised us in the interviews: "get through the diplomatic representation to the business area." To keep policy debate informed, updates from this Platform are regularly fed back to the more senior-level participants at regular ADFM Meetings.

- **Continuity of participation:** Wherever possible, convenors tried to encourage continuity of participation between meetings and repeatedly invited the same representatives. This considerably helped build not only relationships but also expertise. However, government and UN staff rotation systems meant that frequent turnover interrupted this. Continuity remains a challenge, although there has been one instance where a participant rotated out of a relevant position and later returned at a more senior level, with positive effects for the Platform. The integration of new participants helps to inform a wider breadth of public servants about ATD issues, however it can become a challenge to pitch conversations at the right level for both incoming and longstanding members.

ELEMENT 3: CREATING THE RIGHT ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

Convenors believe that senior support for creating the Platform originally (during discussions at the 8th and 9th ADFM meetings) has been important not only for its initial establishment but also its ongoing participation and buy-in from government agencies. In addition, the below elements have also contributed to the success of the Platform:

Creating a safe, trusted space

The Platform is designed to be a 'safe space' for government officials to be honest about their challenges without fear of blame or shame. In order to achieve this, convenors took the below steps to create a space where participants know what to expect and are prepared and supported to have honest, respectful and constructive conversations. This also contributed to increased trust among participants, as noted in Key Outcome 3.

- **Chatham House Rule conversations:** All discussions at Platform meetings take place under the Chatham House Rule of non-attribution, meaning information shared can be repeated, but not who said what. Convenors create a high-level summary after each meeting in line with this rule. This allows people to speak more freely during discussions, and contributes to relationship and trust-building over time.
- **Detailed pre-briefing packs:** Before meetings a participant pack is circulated which comprises an agenda, participant list, up-to-date information about national level contexts and short profiles of each participant, so that everyone knows who is 'in the room' (even when the room is virtual). Many of those interviewed identified these packs and particularly the short participant profiles as an important element of their preparation, saying that it contributed to their level of comfort in participating.
- **Pre-briefings:** Ahead of each meeting, convenors brief as many participants as possible by phone or video, to explain how the meeting will run, what topics will be discussed, and

hear from them about their priorities, objectives and any concerns. These briefings not only help to ensure everyone is well-prepared and comfortable coming into the meeting, but also helps to surface any underlying tensions or concerns ahead of time, so that they aren't a surprise during the meeting. Where possible these briefings are conducted in national groups so that participants have a chance to meet each other ahead of the Platform. Convenors also set up group-chats among national groups ahead of the Platform meetings as a way of further building relationships.

- **Preparing participants to actively contribute:** In addition to pre-briefings, convenors design the agenda to ensure that participants each have a role in the success of the meetings, in the spirit of peer-learning. These roles could be chairing a session, sharing an example on a particular topic, or leading a small group discussion. This approach ensured that the Platform meeting had a clear purpose, held value for all attendees and that all participants felt actively engaged in the process and were prepared to contribute meaningfully.

Language

Part of getting the 'right' people around the table can mean providing interpretation services, as not everyone with in-depth expertise on ATD implementation has fluency in English. Platform meetings were therefore convened in English, Thai and Bahasa Indonesia (Malaysian participants to date have been comfortable using English). This enabled convenors to invite the most relevant individuals, and also helped participants to feel comfortable speaking and listening in their preferred languages.

There are challenges associated with the decision to hold the meetings in three languages. Firstly there are cost and logistical implications, particularly for in-person events. For example, during the meeting held in Putrajaya, it was not possible to find an appropriate Thai interpreter in Malaysia, so convenors had to cover the costs of flying an interpreter to the meeting from Thailand. Secondly it is more effort, as convenors also brief the interpreters ahead of the event on the agenda, themes, key terminology and particularly any sensitive or confusing terms. It also risks creating barriers or leading to misunderstandings when interpretation doesn't go smoothly. Overall, however, convenors agree it is worth these risks to enable appropriate people to attend and contribute effectively.

The convenors would again emphasise that these elements all take additional time, effort and energy and are equally required regardless of whether the meeting is in-person or online.

ELEMENT 4: SITE VISITS AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

Site visits play a crucial role in this Platform by providing a tangible connection to the realities of ATD programs. They offer a rare opportunity to observe first-hand the conditions, operations, and impacts of these programs on real people. This fosters a deeper understanding and appreciation of the complexities and successes of ATD measures, which may be lost in a roundtable setting with some who might not be familiar with the realities on the ground. As one participant said “when people have these policy discussions we can forget we’re talking about real people.”

Taking stakeholders out of their usual environments and immersing them in different settings helps break down preconceived biases and fosters more creative thinking by witnessing the realities on the ground. These visits can also help to “break the ice” among participants, who spend informal time together on buses, at the sites themselves and during the debrief. Thus the visits not only enhance the learning experience but also foster stronger collaboration and a shared commitment to improving and expanding ATD. Convenors found that this was true regardless of whether participants were from abroad or from the host country.

“Government officials see statistics and numbers.

In the field it is not numbers, we can remind ourselves of the reality.”

– Thai public servant

Site visits are one way of including lived experience perspectives in the Platform. Over time the Platform has grown its engagement with those who have lived experience. This is crucial as individuals with direct experience of detention or ATD bring invaluable insights to policy discussions. In addition to site visits, convenors try to involve perspectives from lived experience in other ways, through involving some participants with refugee background in Platform meetings, and sharing video messages from adolescents who had experienced an ATD program. It is important to consider safety and safeguarding for those with lived experience entering these discussions, which can sometimes be sensitive. The Platform convenors recognise that meaningful engagement with these contributors is a journey and one that they can always improve on going forward.

Case study: Setting up a Site Visit

Setting up a site visit involves meticulous preparation and coordination to ensure a meaningful and impactful experience for all participants. Initially, it is crucial to speak with potential organisations that can host the visit, ensuring they are well-suited to demonstrate the effective implementation of ATD. Coordination with the host is vital to align expectations, understand their capacity, and establish a clear agenda, and also to ensure that the visit does not disrupt their regular day-to-day operations. Site visit agendas should incorporate sessions where individuals with lived experience can share their stories, insights and recommendations, where appropriate and safe to do so. Additionally, convenors recommend providing participants with reading materials in advance that introduce the site and the organisation, along with a visitor guide, to help set the context and objectives for the visit.

During the site visit, it is essential to ensure that the discussions and activities centre around the experiences and perspectives of those directly affected by detention policies. Facilitating direct engagement between participants and people affected by immigration detention allows for an authentic exchange of ideas and experiences, fostering empathy and deeper understanding. After the visit, debrief sessions with participants and also with the host organisation are important to reflect on the insights gained and to discuss potential improvements and follow-up actions. This debrief helps consolidate learning, reinforce relationships, and identify practical steps for implementing alternative detention strategies in other contexts.

ELEMENT 5: CAREFUL AGENDA DESIGN

Interviews yielded a lot of useful feedback on the agenda design, including advice to put it together more collaboratively. Below are some of the elements that participants identified as positive elements of agenda design:

- **Having enough informal time:** Given the importance of relationship building, informal time to chat over lunch and dinner and during breaks was also raised frequently as important. This informal time was what was lost in the online convening of the Platform and could not really be replicated. Due to budget constraints, convenors usually have to pack a lot into the two-day agenda, and with greater resourcing it would be nice to allow for even more informal, relationship-building time.
- **Rotating co-chairs:** Each session of the agenda usually has two different co-facilitators drawn from IDC and the ADFM network or from participants themselves. This not only injects some variety and differing personality styles into the agenda, but also built a sense of ownership of the Platform by members who participated in designing and chairing sessions.

- **Not ‘pre-cooking’ the outcomes:** The focus of the meeting is on creating the space for participants – particularly governments – to work out what they need and want to do next, not for convenors to dictate what this should look like. Sessions and facilitators were intentionally not pushy. The agenda was carefully crafted based on prior consultations in pre-briefings and getting a good understanding of existing challenges and priorities.
- **A mix of time in small groups and time in plenary:** Participants enjoyed the mix of time spent discussing and sharing in plenary, and time spent in small groups with others from the same country as you. Convenors sometimes also broke up small groups to comprise representatives from similar agencies in different countries, allowing for cross-jurisdictional conversations.
- **Hearing about other country contexts:** This was frequently identified as a valuable session of each Platform meeting. As one government representative put it: “We’ve got so much to learn and also to understand about other countries’ thinking around something like detention. We sit in our own world and too often we don’t get challenged in our thinking.” One challenge is how to manage these updates so that they are informative for those arriving new to the Platform, but not repetitive for those who have come repeatedly (explored further below).
- **Having a flexible agenda:** Allowing enough ‘breathing room’ in the agenda to accommodate additional time for conversation or questions on topics of interest was important, and not being too strict or trying to pack too much into each meeting. Participants remarked that the free flow of discussion and open Q&A was a notable feature of this Platform, in part due to the Chatham House Rule and closed-door nature of meetings, and in part due to the work convenors did to warm up participants.





PART 3

Challenges



The process of compiling this learning report also allowed conveners to discuss the challenges involved in arranging the Platform, some of which were also identified by participants.

1. DESIGNING AGENDAS THAT ARE RELEVANT FOR ALL NATIONAL CONTEXTS

The five countries participating in the Platform each have a unique context and history with immigration detention, and different areas in which they are interested in improving. Convenors face a challenge in designing agendas that are useful and relevant to all countries, especially in balancing the needs of repeat participants compared to first-time or newer participants. For instance, outlining the basic concepts of ATD in each meeting has had varying reception – some regular participants felt that this was repetitive and that their national contexts had progressed, yet new participants felt that recapping the key elements of ATD furthered their understanding and allowed them to better participate in the meeting.

This tension demonstrates that while the Platform has been successful in achieving its aims to provide support on ATD, not all individuals or countries are at the same stage of policy reform, or have the same country context or authorising environment for change. To compound this challenge is also the difficulty of inconsistency in representation whenever government officials rotate in their positions.

2. MAINTAINING ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN PLATFORM MEETINGS

Several interviewees noted the annual tempo of meetings was good in terms of being able to provide updates on progress, but challenging in terms of maintaining connections between meetings. As noted above, some country groups like Thailand maintain Whatsapp chats and informal networks between meetings, and some bilateral meetings have been facilitated by the Platform. However for those not engaging in the bilateral meeting they can sometimes feel there is not enough momentum between meetings. Some participants interviewed suggested mid-year check-ins or holding a smaller session online could help. However for now the Platform is not currently sufficiently resourced to maintain a more regular program between sessions beyond the current ad hoc events.

This ad hoc engagement between meetings means that in some cases, where there is staff turnover in government departments, the institutional knowledge of the Platform has to be rebuilt. These cases may lead to participants coming to meetings feeling unprepared for the format or style of the sessions. Convenors found that academics and those from national human rights bodies were often able to ‘bridge’ the connections between government and civil society, and also often have longer-term roles which enable more continuity.

3. RESOURCES AND SUSTAINABILITY

Another key challenge facing the Platform is the significant resourcing required to effectively coordinate both national and regional efforts. To achieve the Platform’s ambitious outcomes, extensive groundwork must be laid at the national level, including relationship-building, policy development, and stakeholder engagement. This work then needs to be aligned to the agenda design to ensure Platform participants are prepared and feel comfortable to actively participate. The design and implementation of these processes are both resource intensive, requiring careful attention to ensure the ‘key elements of design’ listed above enable outcomes.

This places considerable demand on the convening organisations, which are both relatively small non-government organisations. It can be challenging to raise funds for this type of policy work given a lot of it happens behind the scenes, or is based on relationship-building. Adequate resourcing is critical to maintain the Platform’s momentum and ensure it can continue to drive meaningful change across both national and regional levels. Convenors are currently exploring options for the Platform’s future to make it more sustainable and ideally to be able to convene more activities between annual meetings.

4. MEANINGFUL AND SAFE INCLUSION OF LIVED EXPERIENCE LEADERS

To date convenors have had mixed success in meaningfully including those with lived experience of the detention system in Platform meetings, as noted above. This has largely been due to concerns about personal and psychological safety, particularly of children, given the sensitive nature of this work in many country contexts. Convenors have worked to address this by bringing in voices of adolescents with lived experience via pre-recorded videos, or interacting with people who have experienced detention during site visits. However, convenors are looking at how to better include these perspectives as equal participants around the roundtable in future meetings.





PART 4

Future Directions

The process of going through this internal review has been incredibly illustrative for IDC, CPD and the ADFM Secretariat in assessing the strengths of this Platform and potential future directions. A number of outcomes and lessons from the review include:

Redefining the Scope and Activities

In response to challenges 1 and 2 mentioned above, convenors are considering revising the scope to include all people impacted or at risk of detention, and to also facilitate other learning opportunities outside of broader multilateral meetings, such as bilateral visits.

Convenors will hold the next Platform Meeting in Australia

After successful in-person meetings in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, convenors are now looking to hold the next meeting in-person in Australia in early 2025. Holding the meeting in Australia would be an opportunity to share lessons learned from Australia's recent move away from held detention of children, its work on social cohesion and multiculturalism, and the support systems provided to new migrants and refugees living in Australia. These have all been raised by participants at past meetings as areas of interest. Based on lessons from this report, convenors will ensure the agenda for the next meeting is designed collaboratively to be of maximum use to all participants.

Sustainability

As noted above, funding remains a major challenge to the sustainability of this peer-learning model, and currently the Platform is only funded to continue until mid-2025. The convening organisations are exploring ways to continue the Platform, possibly in a new form or by bringing on new hosts. Scoping is also underway to ensure tighter links with existing national and regional processes, more online meetings and bilateral engagement. Both convening organisations are open to and actively working with prospective funders and partners to secure continuation of the Platform and its associated activities.

Embedding lessons into the design of other Platforms

Following the success of the Platform in the Asia Pacific region, IDC is planning to initiate a similar platform in Europe and a cross-regional platform across Africa, MENA and Europe. The objectives, history and key elements of design outlined in this report will be used as a base to design the new Platforms, adapting to contextual needs as necessary. Planning is currently underway.

The Platform has also received global recognition both as a useful forum and policy tool. For example, the Platform was featured as a key example of good practice in the 'Global Online

Peer Learning Exchange on Working to End Child Detention in the Context of International Migration', organised by the United Nations Network on Migration workstream on alternatives to detention co-convened by IDC, UNICEF and UNHCR in May 2023. It was noted the Platform was particularly strong in securing regional engagement and multi-actor involvement, and this recognition may lead it to be replicated elsewhere.



ABOUT THE AUTHORS



International Detention Coalition is the world's leading network dedicated to ending immigration detention. We are a global coalition, uniting civil society organisations, community groups and individuals working to end immigration detention and promote non-custodial, rights-based alternatives to detention (ATD). We believe refugees, migrants and all people on the move should be able to live freely while they await the outcome of their immigration case, and we advocate to secure the human rights and dignity of all people impacted by and at risk of immigration detention. To this end, IDC strategically builds movements and influences law, policy and practice to end immigration detention and to implement ATD. Our goal is to ensure that human rights are respected in migration systems. This includes community support, meeting basic needs like healthcare, food and housing, and ensuring the right to work, access education and contribute to society.



The Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM) is a Track II process established in August 2015 to pursue more effective, durable and dignified approaches to forced migration in the Asia Pacific. It has become a leading expert group on issues of forced migration in the region, trusted by the Bali Process and ASEAN for independent and credible advice. The ADFM Secretariat comprises policy institutes in four countries: the Centre for Policy Development in Australia, the National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) in Indonesia, the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University Thailand, and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia.

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