

Eighth Meeting of the Regional Peer Learning Platform on Alternative Care Arrangements for Children in the Context of International Migration in the Asia Pacific

18-20 February 2025 | Sydney, Australia

Summary Report

Background

This Regional Peer Learning Platform brings together individuals from policy and implementing agencies in the governments of Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand and Thailand, as well as experts from civil society, academia and international organisations. The purpose of the Platform is to share promising practice and concrete examples of what is working in each national context, with the aim of transitioning away from the immigration detention of children. In addition to supporting policy development through sharing knowledge and experiences, the Platform also facilitates bilateral engagement on specific areas of interest and arranges site visits to inspire meaningful learning and change.

The Platform was created in November 2019 and met for the first time in Bangkok on the thirtieth anniversary of the Convention of the Rights of the Child. During the pandemic the Platform convened four virtual sessions on topics including case management and mainstreaming child protection, and since the pandemic has met in Putrajaya (November 2022), in Jakarta (February 2024) and now in Sydney in February 2025. While the meetings are centred on alternatives to detention (ATD) of children in the context of migration, the Sydney meeting also covered related themes of social cohesion, holistic case management services, strengthening rights-based migration management, government civil society partnerships and opportunities for regional cooperation in the context of the rapidly changing international system. The meeting involved a mix of roundtable discussion, site visits and an evening panel discussion.

Each national context is unique and each country is on its own journey away from the held detention of children. No one country has a perfect system or knows all the answers. With this in mind, the Platform is based on the understanding that we can all learn a lot from each other's experiences, particularly when we share frankly and openly with each other and involve a wide range of stakeholders in the discussion.

"The "peer" aspect of the Platform provides a safe space for discussion and this is something very rare. This is what diplomacy should be - not one where we don't walk the talk, but where we try to."

Summary of substantive sessions

The meeting opened with a thought-provoking Welcome to Gadigal Country which invited attendees to reflect on the Indigenous groups in each of their home countries, and reflected on the long history of incarceration of Indigenous children in Australian institutions. Next, Assistant Minister for Immigration Matt Thistlethwaite provided some welcoming remarks, highlighting Australia's migration history, and reiterating a commitment to upholding traditions of providing support to those in need, particularly refugees. He acknowledged the government's responsibility to build and maintain social license for migration policy, and to address the unprecedented global displacement crisis, ensuring any detention is used as a last resort, and the best interest of the child are paramount.

Following this welcome, each country then shared progress they have made since the last Platform meeting in February 2024. In line with the Chatham House Rule of non-attribution, below are some of the key themes that emerged:

- There is demonstrable political will to end child detention which is evidenced in efforts to strengthen legal and policy frameworks in the region.
- There has been significant progress in migration policy reform in some countries, particularly in identifying ATD as part of broader migration reforms like screening for protection needs and enabling access to education. There is also some growing consideration in shifting approaches from transitioning people out of held detention to reducing arrest and detention in the first place.

- Challenges persist, particularly in implementation of new ATD policies, which can be hindered by bureaucratic or capacity issues. Negative media or public discourse can also be divisive and negatively influence reform.
- Another challenge raised was lack of accurate data, or challenges sharing data between relevant agencies and organisations due to trust deficits or incompatibility.
- Some countries have seen the benefits of regularising people's status through processes like bridging visas or screening mechanisms as a way of balancing national security with protection and empowerment.
- Inter-agency cooperation was seen as critical for successful ATD. In particular, whole-of-government approaches to child safeguarding – making children's rights everybody's responsibility, rather than confined to one department – was identified as a key reason for success in implementing ATD.
- Likewise, whole of society approaches were identified as important in implementing successful ATD, particularly the value of peer learning, trust-building, and stakeholder partnerships between different actors.
- Finally, funding constraints have had a substantive impact on the migration sector in the region, particularly with the reduction in United States financial and resettlement support for refugees and migrants, and cuts to development funding globally. In this context, it is worth noting that detention is far more expensive than community based care of refugees and migrants.

"What I've learned over these last 2.5 days, whether from a government or non-government perspective, is that ATD is an issue that needs to be handled with seriousness, concern, and passion"

Site visits

Participants attended site visits to two different organisations providing services to refugee and asylum seekers in Australia. The first was Settlement Services International (SSI) and the second was the Asylum Seekers Centre (ASC). These organisations were chosen to demonstrate the breadth and diversity of services and models in Australia, and provided a useful insight into how migration systems in Australia operate. SSI is contracted by the Australian Government to deliver its Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) program to individuals waiting for a humanitarian visa in Australia. While at SSI, participants learned more about the SRSS program, which includes short, needs based support for things like accommodation, education, employment, health assessments, financial support, links to community and other necessities. Discussion also covered other parts of Australia's migration system including bridging visas and community placement, and the relationship between the Department of Home Affairs and SSI as an organisation contracted to deliver their programs.

Participants went to the Asylum Seekers Centre (ASC) on the following day, visiting both ASC's main centre in Newtown and their operations out of the Auburn Community Centre. Visiting both locations allowed participants to observe operations in practice, including access to case management and legal support, a health clinic, and food preparation. Participants also met volunteers and staff with lived experience who introduced their holistic casework model. ASC provides services to those who are not covered by the SRSS program, and those who may be living in the Australian community long-term on bridging visas while awaiting an outcome on a protection application. Unlike SSI, the ASC does not receive federal government funding and is predominately supported by individual and philanthropic donations.

Through these site visits, participants observed two of the many different types of services provided to refugees and people seeking asylum in Sydney, and were able to discuss the benefits and challenges directly with staff both during the visits and in follow up sessions of the Platform. Some common reflections were on the importance of open dialogue and trust between government and civil society in these types of working partnerships, and the huge positive impact of effective holistic case management services. The site visits also reaffirmed the cost-effectiveness of ATD models, showing that in addition to improved wellbeing and community outcomes, and being an effective means of encouraging compliance, the cost of supporting a person to be self-sufficient in the community is far lower than the cost of detaining someone in an institution.

Panel discussion

For the first time at a Platform meeting, a panel discussion was held in the evening of the second day, as an opportunity for participants to meet and network with others working in the refugee and migration sector in Sydney. After two busy days, this allowed participants to zoom out and situate their ATD interventions in the context of broader rights-based migration systems. It was also an opportunity for Sydney-based experts to meet international counterparts and learn more about the Platform's work. The discussion featured distinguished panellists Zaki Haidari, Sriprapha Petcharamesree and Annie Harvey, with closing remarks from President of the Australian Human Rights Commission, Hugh de Kretser.

The discussion focused on how to support refugees and migrants settle well in communities, the benefits of inclusion and social cohesion, and lessons explored from partnerships between civil society and government at all levels in achieving these outcomes. Zaki Haidari offered powerful insights into the realities of seeking protection and transitioning to life in Australia, and outlined practical steps that governments and communities can take to improve conditions for refugees, particularly emphasising access to education, healthcare, and work opportunities, both in Australia and across Southeast Asia. Sriprapha Petcharamesree reflected on the region's progress to date in supporting refugees and migrants at risk of detention and underscored the importance of peer learning in advancing policy and practice reform, including the implementation of community-based ATD. Annie Harvey shared lessons from her time in civil society and with the New South Wales government in implementing settlement policies, including the development of youth forums to provide input to policymaking.

“When migrants are visible, this facilitates social cohesion and integration - into our economy, society, and culture. Social cohesion needs to be done naturally. We need to make migrants visible, make them have relationships with locals, not isolate them and put them in detention”

Social cohesion

Participants at the 2024 Peer Learning Platform meeting in Jakarta requested that social cohesion receive more attention at the next event, so a dedicated session was designed in this year's agenda. Social cohesion has been tested throughout the region in recent years and addressing it is a crucial function of government. It is essential for successful, sustainable alternatives to detention, as it creates an enabling environment in which migrants and refugees are included into host communities contributing to thriving diverse and strong communities. Although each country has differing policies around long-term settlement of refugees, participants broadly agreed on the benefits of short-term inclusion as a means of peaceful coexistence and a key for social cohesion, and that the essence of multiculturalism and social cohesion extends beyond policy into people's cultures, practices, and lived experiences.

Some key themes from the discussions included:

- The role of social cohesion as a nation-building tool and to strengthen democracy, and the impact of social cohesion on arts, economic sectors, health, sports, disability, education, housing and beyond.
- Across all contexts, the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation was recognised as a challenge to social cohesion, as was scarcity mindsets and lack of trust and understanding between communities. It was recognised that there is a need to counter misinformation and disinformation to prevent polarisation.
- The importance of involving communities directly in policy-making to create policies which are impactful and sustainable, and that have community support.
- Focusing on policies and interventions that promote connection, identity, belonging, and inclusion were identified as key. One expert encouraged breaking down barriers and building understanding between communities through a “3Es strategy” of ‘exposure, education and experience’.
- The need for increased engagement and training with the media, and more planned, proactive engagement from the government to promote the visibility and positive perception of refugees and migrants, especially media that reaches local communities living with or alongside migrant communities.

Opportunities for regional cooperation

On the third day, the Platform focused on opportunities for regional and global cooperation on implementing ATD, which have been summarised in the below table. In addition to these opportunities, many countries also reiterated their commitment to pledges made under the Global Refugee Forum and the International Migration Review Forum.

Regional / international opportunity	How Platform participants can be engaged
Development of ASEAN Guidelines on the Implementation of ATD for Children in the Context of Migration	<p>The development of these guidelines is a substantive milestone, and an important opportunity for Platform members to engage with.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASEAN Member States provide input to the Guidelines throughout the drafting process. • As ASEAN Strategic Partners, Australia and New Zealand can support the development of these guidelines, and their ongoing implementation. • ATD Platform meetings can use the Guidelines to monitor progress going forward.
ACWC and AICHR are both in the process of developing their new five-year work plans for 2026-2030	ASEAN Member States can work with their national ACWC and AICHR Representatives to ensure that ATD implementation is represented in the priorities of ACWC and AICHR.
International Migration Review Forum 2026 / Global Forum on Migration and Development / UN Migration Network ATD Workstream and other opportunities	<p>Ensuring that progress on ATD happening in the Asia Pacific region is also shared globally through these forums.</p> <p>Building a network of champions from the region to share lessons at the global level through these forums. Platform members can be leaders in the region.</p> <p>This Platform can also contribute to the setting up of other similar platforms in other regions, such as Europe or the Middle East and North Africa.</p>

Outcomes and next steps

The final session began by recapping lessons from the past eight Platform meetings, identified in the recently released report [Learning Together](#). These include four key outcomes: building collective momentum to progress national reform, developing policy champions, widening space for collaboration between government and civil society, and building momentum for regional collaboration, and five key factors of success: convening in partnership, being intentional about who is in the room, creating the right enabling environment, site visits and lived experience, and careful agenda design.

The group then provided feedback on how the Platform can be most useful going forward. Areas identified include:

- Specific areas suggested for further discussion either in the Platform or at a bilateral level:
 - More in depth discussion about how to ensure the safety of unaccompanied minors in the community, who in some cases lack clear legal guardians.
 - Understanding the education and training needs of resettlement countries in order to design appropriate opportunities and pathways for refugees in host countries.
- Convening more often at the national level between these regional meetings, and potentially offering mentorship, coaching opportunities or establishing a buddy system to stay connected between meetings.
- Potentially expanding the scope of discussions beyond ATD of children to look at related issues like ATD of families, and/or resettlement and complementary pathways.
- Connecting with ACWC and AICHR about supporting the development of their five-year work plans.
- Following up with ACWC about the development of the ASEAN Guidelines, and consider ways the Platform can support their implementation, including holding an online session about them once they have been adopted.
- Tracking concrete indicators of progress at the national level between meetings as a means of maintaining momentum and also accountability.
- Convening the Platform again in another year, potentially in Thailand, and bringing on additional financial support to ensure the Platform is sustainable going forward.

IDC and the ADFM Secretariat thank all of those who offered concrete commitments during the final session. We will follow up with you individually to progress these further. For further information, please contact adfm@cpd.org.au.