

Forced migration experts identify reasons for hope after a difficult year

ADFM Meeting, Jakarta, 23-24 June 2026

Transitioning from traditional humanitarian assistance to longer-term empowerment strategies and responsibility-sharing was a key focus of discussions among participants from eight countries in Jakarta. The Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM) brought together experts from eight countries including senior government officials, parliamentarians, academics, people with experience of displacement, UN, private sector and civil society leaders, all of whom attended in a personal capacity. The ADFM Secretariat was delighted that conversations were so engaged and optimistic, particularly after a tumultuous year for policies related to forced migration globally.

The ADFM Dinner on 23 June featured remarks from MP Mercy Chriesty Barends of Indonesia and Ambassador Jane Duke of Australia, who each reflected on how to achieve stronger regional cooperation in the face of declining trust in global and multilateral institutions, regional irregular migration pressures and the role of regional institutions, among other things. As all ADFM discussions take place under the Chatham House Rule, what follows is a high-level summary of the two-day event.

Livelihoods opportunities for people in protracted refugee situations

The first day of the ADFM discussions featured a deep dive into recent policy developments in Thailand which allow legal access to work for refugees living in the nine camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, including the [recent provision](#) of new ID cards to camp-based refugees. Meeting attendees heard about the rationale for this policy, details about its design, planning implementation to date and challenges faced along the way. Participants from other countries actively asked questions and discussed elements that could be adapted in their own country. While each country has its own unique context and priorities, conversations were very animated about potential ways forward.

Discussions identified some common elements of successful livelihoods policies:

- **Place-based:** policies should not be top-down but tailored to local contexts, using a multistakeholder approach that includes host communities, refugees, local and national government and employers to ensure widespread buy-in and effective implementation.
- **Part of holistic reform:** livelihood policies alone are insufficient; they work best when linked to language training, skills development, registration documents and access to healthcare.
- **Address exploitation risks:** policies should be aligned with national labour and migrant worker protection laws and policies to ensure risks of modern slavery and human trafficking are addressed. This would also benefit host countries by demonstrating alignment with international standards on modern slavery and other forms of exploitation.
- **Accompanied by clear communications:** communicating these policies clearly to the public is key. Governments can explore media training, digital literacy and communications campaigns as means of addressing online misinformation, disinformation and hate speech.
- **Regular review and adjustment:** building in review periods of the policy every 3-6 months was recommended.

After an animated discussion, it was also noted that policy-makers should keep in mind those not able to access livelihoods policies - either due to illness, disability, age or another vulnerability - and ensure policy solutions for them also exist. There were also discussions about how developing effective livelihood policies can mitigate risks of refugees or other vulnerable migrants becoming victims of trafficking.

The links between local livelihoods policies and potential resettlement pathways were also raised. Participants discussed challenges in aligning local training programs with the skills gaps and requirements of resettlement countries, and ways that these could be overcome to enable refugees to take up these pathways alongside where relevant. Participants hypothesised about potential regional mutual skills qualification regimes that could include qualified refugees, not only migrant workers.

Although not the primary focus of the ADFM discussions at this meeting, several participants noted the importance of not overlooking root causes to displacement, which in this region often relate to ongoing conflict and persecution of minorities in Myanmar. Addressing these root causes is an ongoing challenge and an area of focus for many in this region. Recognising that this objective will take years if not decades, improving lives in transit was recognised as a worthwhile endeavour. As one participant put it: “while we wait for long term solutions, little things can help”.

Responsibility sharing and the role of regional institutions

The second day focused on responsibility sharing, both at the institutional level and more broadly in the region. The day’s early discussions were shaped by a draft ADFM Secretariat paper on the role of ASEAN’s Dialogue Partners. The paper was developed as a follow up to the 2024 ADFM Secretariat report [From Crisis to Collaboration](#), which outlined how ASEAN’s existing mechanisms could be leveraged to strengthen protection for displaced persons. Many participants welcomed the paper’s practical and specific recommendations across six areas of ASEAN cooperation: human rights, protection of women and children, people-to-people cooperation, labour mobility, maritime governance, and trafficking and transnational crime. Feedback from discussions during the ADFM meeting will inform the publication of this paper in coming weeks.

Some common trends in feedback and suggestions for what to take forward:

- Participants highlighted the importance of **identifying practical entry points and internal champions within ASEAN**. Some opportunities included the people smuggling workstream under the Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC), led by Malaysia, and the role of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), particularly AICHR’s work implementing the recently adopted ASEAN Declaration on Promoting the Right to Development and the Right to Peace Towards Realising Inclusive and Sustainable Development.
- Participants emphasised the value of **building on existing ASEAN and Bali Process mechanisms**, and exploring collaboration where institutional priorities overlap. This is particularly relevant with the 25th anniversary of the Bali Process ahead in 2027, and opportunities such as the new maritime people smuggling response group of the Bali Process Regional Information, Liaison and Outreach Network (RILON) were raised. There are also opportunities to standardise victim identification procedures across the region, particularly for law enforcement and maritime authorities, as well as strengthening cooperation on trafficking linked to online scam centres.
- **Strengthening humanitarian maritime responses** amid concern that conditions in the region are beginning to resemble the read up to the 2015 Andaman Sea crisis. There was support for incorporating irregular migration scenarios into existing search and rescue exercises and contingency planning. Building protection-sensitive approaches into existing maritime cooperation is a practical way to improve preparedness and coordination while complementing ASEAN’s work on maritime safety, humanitarian assistance, and disaster response.

Beyond cooperation through formal institutions, participants also discussed wider responsibility sharing in the face of the dramatic shifts in global refugee funding and resettlement commitments over the past two years. Some ideas to emerge from this session included:

- Finding **ways for refugees to access labour mobility pathways** within and outside the region, including new initiatives like Train-to-Hire, and expanding programs that connect skills development and livelihood opportunities with durable solutions while also responding to labour market needs in both transit and resettlement countries.
- **Exploring new and creative funding arrangements:** Even in the current limited funding landscape, there are still opportunities to work together, particularly with donors from this region. More work can be done to connect donors with communities on the ground, and identify where funding can be directed for maximum impact. There also may be opportunities to develop a regional picture of where funding is needed and collectively advocate for that globally.
- **Making the most of existing convening spaces** - including the ADFM and ATD Regional Peer Learning Platform - and encouraging bilateral discussions, peer learning and relationship building on issues related to forced migration.

Recommendations from the ADFM Secretariat:

- Countries in the region continue to exchange experiences of developing livelihood opportunities for refugees, including the recent example from Thailand, and what opportunities there may be to adapt these for other national contexts. Organisations like IDC and the ADFM Secretariat stand ready to support these exchanges.
- ASEAN SOMTC Working Group on People Smuggling, led by Malaysia, explore the possibility of having standardised regional cross-border mechanisms to operationalise maritime indicators and the non-punishment principle, aiming to prevent the criminalisation of smuggled migrants.
- UNHCR and IOM facilitate sharing examples of what has worked in different countries to promote social co-existence and address hate speech, misinformation and disinformation, as part of ongoing work on the route-based approach.
- The Bali Process Government and Business Forum engage with the International Labour Organisation (ILO), private sector and business councils in undertaking skills and needs assessment in each country, and explore interest in ASEAN-wide analysis of demand and supply.
- Institutions continue to research and facilitate discussion on the intersection of refugee issues and human trafficking, including ADFM, APRRN, BRIN, IDC, IOM, and UNHCR. The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) can also share examples of successful work rights policies in other regions, as well as research into the intersection of refugee issues and human trafficking.
- Interested organisations can explore aligning their work on protection of lives at sea later this year in the lead up to the usual sailing season. This is part of an existing global initiative led by UNHCR, and may include partnerships with ADFM, AICHR, APRRN and/or the RSO.

In addition to these opportunities, the ADFM Secretariat looks forward to progressing the following activities and recommendations over the coming year:

- The ADFM Secretariat and International Detention Coalition will co-convene the next meeting of the [Regional Peer-Learning Platform on Alternatives to Child Detention](#) in collaboration with the Thai National Security Council in August 2026, to continue to share experiences including from Thailand's right to work policy and how this impacts children and families.
- The ADFM Secretariat will incorporate feedback and launch the ASEAN responsibility sharing discussion paper in the coming weeks.
- The ADFM Secretariat will work with AICHR Malaysia on practical ways to incorporate forced migration into AICHR's ongoing work, including through implementation the Declaration on Promoting the Right to Development and the Right to Peace Towards Realising Inclusive and Sustainable Development.
- The ADFM Secretariat will work with other ADFM participants on growing engagement with upcoming ASEAN Chairs Singapore, Thailand and Timor Leste on forced migration issues.
- The ADFM Secretariat stands ready to support the Bali Process with any strategic changes ahead of its 25th anniversary next year, including alignment with ASEAN priorities

About the ADFM

Established in 2015, the Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM) is an independent Track 1.5 forum for dialogue on the critical forced migration issues facing the region. The ADFM has contributed to changes in governance, policy and practice benefiting refugees, stateless, and trafficked persons, in partnership with the region's institutions and national governments. The ADFM Secretariat is a collaboration between the Centre for Policy Development (CPD) in Australia, the Indonesian National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia and the Faculty of Law at Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. For more information or to discuss any of the above further, please contact adfm@cpd.org.au.