

# Partnering for Protection



The role of Dialogue Partners in supporting ASEAN's response to displacement and forced migration in the region

ASIA DIALOGUE  
ON  
**FORCED  
MIGRATION**

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Established in August 2015, the Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM) is a ‘second track’ process pursuing more effective, durable, and dignified approaches to forced migration in the Indo-Pacific. The ADFM brings together government and non-government decision-makers from nine affected countries and representatives from UN agencies, each of whom acts in their personal capacities. The ADFM is led by a regional Secretariat, convened by the Centre for Policy Development in Australia, in partnership with the National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) in Indonesia, the Faculty of Law, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia. Through its independent discussions and policy development, and its work in conjunction with existing mechanisms for government-to-government cooperation on these issues, the ADFM is helping to build a platform for greater regional cooperation to address the challenges of forced migration in the Indo-Pacific.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While often overshadowed by global crises further afield, Southeast Asia is quietly home to one of the most significant humanitarian emergencies in the world. Driven largely by the ongoing civil war in Myanmar and exacerbated by global conflicts, economic volatility, and climate change, displacement and forced migration in the region has reached levels not seen in decades.

Official statistics show that Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Member States now collectively host approximately 3.6 million internally displaced persons, 237,000 registered refugees, and 66,000 asylum seekers—numbers that will continue to grow without urgent intervention. Unofficially, however, the true scale of displacement is far higher: Thailand alone hosts more than an estimated 4 million people from Myanmar, many displaced due to violence since the 2021 coup.

The human cost of this crisis is profound. Major cuts to international humanitarian aid have caused conditions in refugee camps to deteriorate, forcing an increasing number of displaced individuals and families to undertake dangerous journeys in search of safety. 2025 was the deadliest year on record for maritime movements in the region, with 900 Rohingya refugees reported dead or missing in the Andaman Sea and Bay of Bengal.

Across the region, whether arriving by land or sea, a lack of legal status leaves the vast majority of displaced populations in a state of permanent limbo. Denied the right to work legally, go to school, or access healthcare, hundreds of thousands are forced into informal work, leaving them highly vulnerable to exploitation and human trafficking. This also means countries are missing out on the significant economic contributions that all migrants can make to national economies.

Despite the worsening crisis, regional policy responses remain fragmented, ineffective, and lacking in coordination—with most policy responses set at a national level. Because the majority of displaced people hail from Myanmar, ASEAN's policy of non-interference has severely restricted its ability to address the root causes of the displacement head on. However, countries in Southeast Asia host refugees from across the globe. Regardless of how the civil war

in Myanmar unfolds, displacement will remain a defining regional challenge for years to come. No single country can manage it alone.

Building on the 2024 Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM) report, *From Crisis to Collaboration*, this paper outlines how ASEAN's 11 Dialogue Partners can help transform these fragmented national responses into a coordinated regional strategy. Unlike most ASEAN nations, the majority of Dialogue Partners are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention. By leveraging their deep policy experience and long-standing agreements with ASEAN across human rights, labour, and security, these partners are uniquely positioned to help drive a more cohesive response.

This paper proposes a set of actionable, practical recommendations for ASEAN Dialogue Partners to improve regional coordination on displacement, including:

- Protecting the rights of all displaced women and children, regardless of legal status.
- Including both displaced persons and host communities in existing ASEAN programmes.
- Including displaced persons in the protection of vulnerable groups.
- Integrating protection considerations into regional cooperation on transnational crime.
- Promoting migration pathway opportunities through labour, skills, and education partnerships.
- Strengthening coordination on humanitarian maritime responses in the Andaman Sea.

The report also argues that current funding aimed at countering human trafficking networks has had mixed results and calls on Dialogue Partners to review and redirect some of these resources toward creating both access to meaningful livelihoods and humane, legal migration pathways that more effectively address the needs of displaced populations.

By improving cooperation on education and employment access, ASEAN Member States can harness the economic contributions of all migrants, allocate resources more effectively, and improve regional stability. Supported by Dialogue Partners, this approach offers a path toward a more stable, prosperous, and people-centered region, fully in line with the ASEAN Charter.





# 1. FORCED MIGRATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: THE CASE FOR REGIONAL ACTION

In Southeast Asia displacement is driven by conflict, persecution, statelessness, environmental stress, and weak protection systems. The ongoing civil war in Myanmar remains a major driver of displacement both inside and across its national borders, and has exacerbated the protracted displacement of one million Rohingya living in Cox's Bazar. Regional dynamics are further compounded by global crises, including most recently the 2026 war in the Middle East.

Despite these realities, policies to address displacement in Southeast Asia remain largely national, fragmented and ineffective. In 2024 the Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM)'s report *From Crisis to Collaboration* identified how existing mechanisms and processes within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) can be leveraged to better address forced migration. This paper attempts to expand on that by outlining how ASEAN's partners can support this agenda.

In 2025 ASEAN adopted its *ASEAN Community Vision 2045* which commits to "building a resilient, innovative, dynamic, people-centred ASEAN" that is "empowered in responding to future crises and long-term challenges."<sup>1</sup> The Vision identifies 17 "megatrends" that will shape ASEAN's future including migration, widening development gaps, climate change, natural disasters, and the inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised groups. It also calls for stronger institutional capacity, greater cross-pillar and cross-sectoral coordination, and more effective responses to urgent and complex challenges.

The Vision lays out an ASEAN that is "a caring Community that will ensure the full potential and improve the quality of life for its peoples that is participative, inclusive, sustainable, and promotes social cohesion, hereby ensuring shared prosperity, especially among vulnerable groups, and *leaving no one behind*."<sup>2</sup>

Against this backdrop, forced migration should be understood as a cross-cutting regional challenge that intersects many of ASEAN's

stated priorities, including labour mobility, trafficking in persons, disaster response and social cohesion. As ASEAN seeks to address the opportunities and challenges associated with increasing migration and the inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised groups, ensuring that refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and other displaced populations are not overlooked will be crucial to fully realising the Vision's goal of "leaving no one behind".

The ADFM's 2024 report *From Crisis to Collaboration* highlighted that ASEAN already has a range of mechanisms and cooperation frameworks that can contribute to addressing forced migration, including those relating to human trafficking, labour migration, maritime cooperation, disaster management, and human rights. The challenge is therefore not the absence of regional architecture, but rather how existing mechanisms can be better connected, coordinated, and leveraged to respond to displacement in a manner consistent with ASEAN's own long-term vision.



Strengthening protection for displaced populations is therefore not separate from the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, but a practical contribution to advancing goals of resilience, inclusion, social cohesion, and effective regional cooperation.

As of 2025, ASEAN Member States officially host approximately 237,000 registered refugees, 66,000 asylum seekers, 3.6 million internally displaced persons, and 1.4 million stateless individuals.<sup>3</sup> These official numbers do not include unregistered refugees and irregular migrants. For example, IOM estimates around 4.6 million Myanmar nationals were living in Thailand as of September 2025, of whom about 40% were estimated to be in “irregular situations”, of whom some would be expected to have protection concerns.<sup>4</sup> The vast majority of those internally displaced are inside Myanmar itself, which continues to experience civil war and is still grappling with the impacts of the 2025 earthquake. The number of unregistered refugees is estimated to be far higher.

Refugees and asylum seekers from Myanmar comprise the vast majority of registered refugee populations in ASEAN, accounting for approximately 90% in Malaysia<sup>5</sup> and 94% in Thailand.<sup>6</sup> These movements also affect countries outside ASEAN: more than one million Rohingya refugees live in protracted exile in Bangladesh, and an estimated 40,000 live in India.

Part of the reason ASEAN has been reluctant to address refugee issues are the norms of “consensus”

and “non-interference” as laid out in the ASEAN Charter. However in the face of ongoing violence, more and more actors are making the case for a norm of “non-indifference”.<sup>7</sup> To address the situation in Myanmar, ASEAN Leaders agreed to a ‘5 Point Consensus’ in 2021 and have appointed a Special Envoy on Myanmar which rotates each year. While imperfect, the Consensus is a milestone point of agreement among all members on how to resolve the conflict in Myanmar. Until the conflict is resolved and democracy is returned to the people, it is not safe for those displaced to return.

In the meantime displaced people are living in limbo. Those hosting the largest numbers of refugees are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and that is not likely to change anytime soon.<sup>8</sup> While some countries have nevertheless taken positive practical steps to improve refugee protection on their soil, without national consistency or a regional protection framework, responses remain largely ad hoc. This places pressure on frontline states, which has only worsened following a drastic decline in international funding for refugee responses globally in 2025-26. These conditions work together to increase risks related to human trafficking and maritime safety of vulnerable people.

The latest UNHCR statistics show that 2025 was the deadliest year on record for Rohingya refugees travelling by boat across the Andaman Sea.<sup>9</sup> In April 2026 UNHCR reported a boat carrying over 250 Bangladeshi and Rohingya

individuals capsized, leaving only nine survivors.<sup>10</sup> These dangerous movements are typically facilitated by smuggling or trafficking networks. They are also increasingly mixed - meaning they involve both refugees, asylum seekers, victims of trafficking, and other migrants, each with different legal statuses and protection needs. The transnational and adaptive nature of criminal networks, combined with overlapping jurisdictions and mandates and inconsistent regional cooperation makes responses to these maritime movements particularly challenging.

Stronger regional cooperation and more coordinated engagement by ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners on these issues would align with all three of ASEAN's Community Pillars:

- **Within the Political-Security Community,** unmanaged forced migration poses risks to border stability, maritime safety, and efforts to combat transnational crime, particularly trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling.
- **From the Economic Community perspective,** displacement contributes to informal labour markets, weakens labour governance, and creates missed opportunities to harness human capital in a region facing demographic change and labour shortages.

- **For the Socio-Cultural Community**, protracted displacement challenges ASEAN’s commitment to a people-oriented and people-centred community, placing strain on community cohesion and local service systems.

ASEAN does not need to act alone. Over the years, ASEAN has been supported by a range of partners in developing their existing frameworks. Many of these have become formal “Dialogue Partners”, namely countries that engage ASEAN through structured cooperation, with formal work plans and financial support.<sup>11</sup> Engagement with Dialogue Partners spans all three pillars of the ASEAN Community, Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural, and is institutionalised through formal mechanisms, including summit-level meetings, ministerial dialogues, and senior officials’ meetings.

Dialogue Partner engagement differs from what are known as “Sectoral Dialogue Partners”, who engage with ASEAN on specific, pre-agreed areas, working directly with one or more relevant ASEAN sectoral bodies rather than across all three community pillars. Meanwhile Development Partners focus on providing targeted capacity-building, technical assistance, and development support, with a focus on narrowing development gaps within the region.<sup>12</sup>

As highlighted in *From Crisis to Collaboration*, ASEAN can use its existing cooperation frameworks to address displacement. This report outlines how all 11 Dialogue Partners can support this agenda. It begins by outlining what existing Dialogue Partner support looks like, then proposes six recommended areas to work on. The report concludes with specific opportunities for ASEAN’s two oldest Dialogue Partners: Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

**Table A.**  
List of ASEAN Dialogue Partners, Sectoral Partners and Development Partners<sup>13</sup>

| Dialogue Partner                                                                                                                                                                | Sectoral Dialogue Partner                                                                                            | Development Partner                                        |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| Australia*<br>Canada<br>China*<br>European Union<br>India*<br>Japan*<br>New Zealand*<br>Republic of Korea*<br>Russian Federation<br>United Kingdom<br>United States of America* | Brazil<br>Denmark<br>Morocco<br>Norway<br>Pakistan<br>South Africa<br>Switzerland<br>Turkiye<br>United Arab Emirates | Chile<br>France<br>Germany<br>Italy<br>Netherlands<br>Peru |
| * also has a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with ASEAN                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                                      |                                                            |



## 2. ANALYSIS OF EXISTING ASEAN & DIALOGUE PARTNER COOPERATION

Dialogue Partners have invested significant political, technical, and financial resources over several decades to support ASEAN's development, integration, and regional stability. While the impact of these investments can be difficult to quantify, they have contributed to some significant regional initiatives and policy outcomes.

For example, Australia's support through the Australia-Asia Program to Combat Trafficking in Persons (AAPTIP, now ASEAN-ACT) has contributed to the implementation of the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (ACTIP), a rare within ASEAN as it is legally binding across all ASEAN Member States. Another example is the USAID PROSPECT project which ran from 2018–2024 and supported the creation of Regional Guidelines and Procedures to Address the Needs of Victims of Trafficking in Persons to strengthen access to protection and reintegration assistance.

Dialogue Partner support can translate into concrete regional frameworks and operational tools. For these initiatives to be successful over the long-term, it is critical that it is a genuinely shared agenda, and is not perceived as externally driven. Cooperative models where ASEAN Member States lead the agenda, and co-fund alongside Dialogue Partners, would lead to more meaningful ownership and long-term sustainability of policy reform.

Cooperation should also not be limited to funding or resource mobilisation alone. Dialogue Partners have useful technical and policy development experience, peer learning and study tours that can benefit ASEAN countries as genuine partners, not only beneficiaries or recipients. Further, raising these issues as regular or ad hoc agenda items in closed door and public discussions would also be beneficial.

### A. EXISTING COOPERATION

Existing cooperation between ASEAN and its Dialogue Partners is institutionalised through 'Plans of Action', strategic partnership frameworks, agreements and memoranda of understanding that span the Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural Pillars of ASEAN. Over time, this has created practical channels for technical assistance, funding support, and policy exchange, and as platforms for addressing complex cross-border challenges.

The following section examines existing areas of cooperation to identify where forced migration is currently addressed, where gaps remain, and where practical entry points exist for more engagement, in line with ASEAN's three pillars. Our analysis has identified six relevant existing areas of cooperation between Dialogue Partners and ASEAN, which mirror the six areas identified in *From Crisis to Collaboration*:



## **Migrant worker rights and labour mobility**

Cooperation on migration is most advanced in the context of labour mobility. Dialogue Partners support implementation of the *ASEAN Consensus on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers* through programmes on ethical recruitment, skills development, skills recognition, and labour governance reform. These initiatives aim to facilitate safe and regular migration while reducing exploitation. Extending elements of these programmes to include vulnerable populations like refugees already residing within ASEAN Member States would help to reduce reliance on informal labour markets, which undermine regulatory frameworks and expose individuals to exploitation. This approach is aligned with ASEAN's Economic Community priorities and Socio-Cultural integration goals.

## **Counter-trafficking and transnational crime**

Engagement on trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants is one of the most active areas of cooperation, consistently featured across all Plans of Action. Support for implementation of the ACTIP includes law enforcement training, judicial cooperation, developing victim identification systems, and cross-border coordination. ASEAN's transnational crime architecture, particularly the Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC) and the ASEAN Ministerial

Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC), already facilitates collaboration with Dialogue Partners. Given that refugees and asylum seekers often are caught up in trafficking and smuggling routes, and have unique needs and vulnerabilities, Dialogue Partners can help ASEAN strengthen screening and protection-sensitive practices.

## **Protection of women and children**

Dialogue Partners consistently emphasise advancing gender equality and child protection; an area reflected across all Plans of Action, and aligned with the Women, Peace and Security agenda. These include support for female survivors of trafficking, promotion of women's participation in peace-building, efforts to safeguard children from exploitation, detention and lack of access to education and legal identity. Given women and children are impacted by displacement in different ways to men,<sup>14</sup> programs would be more effective if they address migration dynamics explicitly.

## **Maritime cooperation**

Maritime cooperation is included across all Plans of Action and is advanced through mechanisms such as ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF) and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF), addressing maritime security, safety, and disaster response, often involving joint exercises, technical exchanges, capacity-building for search and rescue and

humanitarian assistance. Although framed primarily in security terms, these activities are also relevant to managing irregular maritime movements and responding to humanitarian situations involving migrants and displaced persons. By incorporating displacement-related scenarios into existing activities, Dialogue Partners can help enhance ASEAN preparedness for irregular maritime movements that pose both humanitarian and security challenges.

## **Human rights**

All but one Dialogue Partner includes clauses on human rights cooperation in their publicly-available Plans of Action.<sup>15</sup> This typically involves partnerships with the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) and the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC). These initiatives support commitments to advancing inclusion and social cohesion, and ensuring that no one is left behind, as laid out in the Community Vision 2045. Refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons and other displaced populations are among those living in vulnerable situations. Ensuring these groups are considered and included within existing ASEAN human rights activities would therefore strengthen the implementation of existing commitments and priorities.

## People-to-people cooperation

People-to-people cooperation has long been a cornerstone of ASEAN engagement and is consistently reflected across all Plans of Action. Through scholarships, academic exchanges, technical and vocational education and training, youth programmes, and cultural initiatives, Dialogue Partners support ASEAN's goals of enhancing education, skills mobility, and 'regional connectivity'. These initiatives contribute to human capital development, innovation, and social cohesion, and could also serve to address vulnerabilities associated with irregular migration.

## B. GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The above six areas of cooperation have yielded numerous written agreements, working group meetings, policy guides, capacity building training, and in the case of counter-trafficking a legally binding convention. However, there is still considerable room for improvement.

First, existing Plans of Action fail to take into account the vulnerability of refugees and asylum seekers in the region. Instead, migration is conceptualised through one of two lenses: as an economic phenomenon to be managed through regulated labour pathways, or as a security challenge to be managed through law enforcement. Individuals who exist outside of these frameworks, are rendered invisible within existing cooperation agendas.

This blind spot also limits the strategic coherence of regional responses, for instance:

- Maritime cooperation attempts to save lives at sea but does not incorporate disembarkation, reception and protection screening, or referral considerations for refugees and asylum seekers, meaning boats carrying asylum seekers - particularly Rohingya - continue to be pushed back to sea.
- Anti-trafficking initiatives build victim-identification frameworks, yet these are not adapted to account for people displaced by conflict or persecution, who have particular vulnerabilities, and there is no referral mechanism whereby victims identified in one jurisdiction would be so identified in another.
- Human rights cooperation promotes inclusive access to services but stops short of engaging with legal identity, temporary stay arrangements, or pathways to self-reliance for people lacking formal status.





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Second, there are questions around the impact achieved through some of these areas of cooperation. For example, Southeast Asia is currently experiencing the worst growth of large-scale, coordinated trafficking in persons in living memory and ASEAN mechanisms appear to be insufficient to address the rapidly escalating crisis.<sup>16</sup> The efficacy of the tens of millions invested by Dialogue Partners into the counter-trafficking and human rights agendas must come into question when faced with this reality. This is particularly true where these trends are affecting the citizens of Dialogue Partner countries: either citizens being defrauded, or as victims of trafficking themselves.

The strength of these decades-old Dialogue Partner relationships should form the basis for frank and honest communication, about evaluating what is working in workplans and what may need to change course. For example, the Republic of Korea, the United Kingdom and the United States of America instituted more targeted policies related to addressing trafficking for online scams in late 2025, in response to the escalation of cases and lack of law enforcement.<sup>17</sup> Where existing plans haven't achieved their goals, it is imperative that both ASEAN and its partners take stock of what has gone wrong and redirect future funding and cooperation to be more effective.

What is needed is a deliberate effort to reflect on and align current cooperation frameworks, recognising displacement as a cross-cutting issue. Dialogue Partners can help ASEAN maximise the impact of investments already made, strengthen regional resilience, and respond more coherently to evolving migration dynamics. This will not happen overnight, but can be developed over time.







### 3. WHAT DIALOGUE PARTNERS CAN DO NOW: PRACTICAL AND ACTIONABLE STEPS

#### A. THEMES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The above six areas of cooperation each provide entry points to strengthen protection for forced migrants. The below recommendations build on current Plans of Action and are relevant for any interested Dialogue Partner.

| Theme                                      | Opportunities                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1. Protection of women and children</b> | <p><b><u>Consider the rights of all women and children, regardless of status:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support operationalisation of the <i>ASEAN Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration</i>, including by finalising and operationalising <i>ASEAN Guidelines on the Implementation of Alternatives to Detention for Children in the Context of Migration</i> and supporting the development of community-based alternatives to immigration detention for children.</li> <li>• Incorporate displacement into existing Women, Peace and Security (WPS) programming to better address the specific vulnerabilities faced by displaced women and girls and to promote their participation in peace, security, and community resilience efforts.</li> </ul> |
| <b>2. People to people cooperation</b>     | <p><b><u>Include both displaced persons and host communities in existing programming:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fund and/or co-create pilot programmes within existing labour cooperation frameworks for training, skills recognition and employment initiatives targeting both host communities and displaced persons.</li> <li>• Support the expansion of the Philippines' Complementary Pathways (CPath) programme, which provides scholarships and safe, legal stay arrangements for Rohingya youth, particularly those residing in Malaysia and Bangladesh.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

| Theme                                                 | Opportunities                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>3. Human rights</b>                                | <p><b><u>Ensure displaced persons are considered within the protection of vulnerable groups:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner with AICHR to ensure displaced persons are considered within the protection of vulnerable groups. For example by assisting AICHR in developing an ASEAN regional report on human rights and development, as part of implementing the ASEAN Declaration on Promoting the Right to Development and the Right to Peace Towards Realising Inclusive and Sustainable Development.<sup>18</sup></li> <li>• Assist AICHR to create guidelines for promoting access to education for all children regardless of migration status; as well as support AICHR to Identify legal, policy, and administrative barriers affecting access to education for children and adults in the context of migration and document good practice among ASEAN Member States, as part of Activity 8, Focus Area 5 of its current Five-Year Work Plan.<sup>19</sup></li> </ul> |
| <b>4. Counter trafficking and transnational crime</b> | <p><b><u>Integrate protection considerations into cooperation on transnational crime:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support capacity-building and training for law enforcement and border officials to better distinguish between traffickers, smugglers, and people in need of international protection, and support the development of oversight and accountability mechanisms where required.</li> <li>• Support the establishment of national Trafficking in Persons Survivor Advisory Councils or Committees, in line with the objectives of the ASEAN Multi-Sectoral Work Plan Against Trafficking in Persons (Bohol TIP Work Plan 2.0). This can ensure survivor perspectives inform policy development, programme design, and service delivery.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>5. Migrant worker rights and labour mobility</b>   | <p><b><u>Promote migration opportunities through labour, skills, and education partnerships:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use the ASEAN Directors-General of Immigration Departments and Heads of Consular Affairs Divisions of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs (DGICM) platform to promote dialogue and cooperation on improving migration management using a protection lens, including protection-sensitive approaches to maritime search and rescue and temporary stay arrangements.</li> <li>• Adapt existing technical and vocational education, training and certification programmes to reach marginalised communities, including refugees and asylum seekers, enabling them to develop skills that support economic participation and self-reliance.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>6. Maritime cooperation</b>                        | <p><b><u>Strengthening humanitarian maritime responses particularly in the Andaman Sea:</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use forums such as the East Asia Summit, ADMM-Plus, ASEAN Regional Forum and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum to advance humanitarian cooperation on maritime governance, particularly search and rescue operations and coordinated responses to maritime movements involving refugees.</li> <li>• Incorporate mixed-migration at sea scenarios into existing search and rescue exercises, maritime capacity-building programmes, and regional contingency planning dialogues to strengthen coordination and preparedness in responding to vessels carrying displaced persons, including refugees and asylum seekers.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |

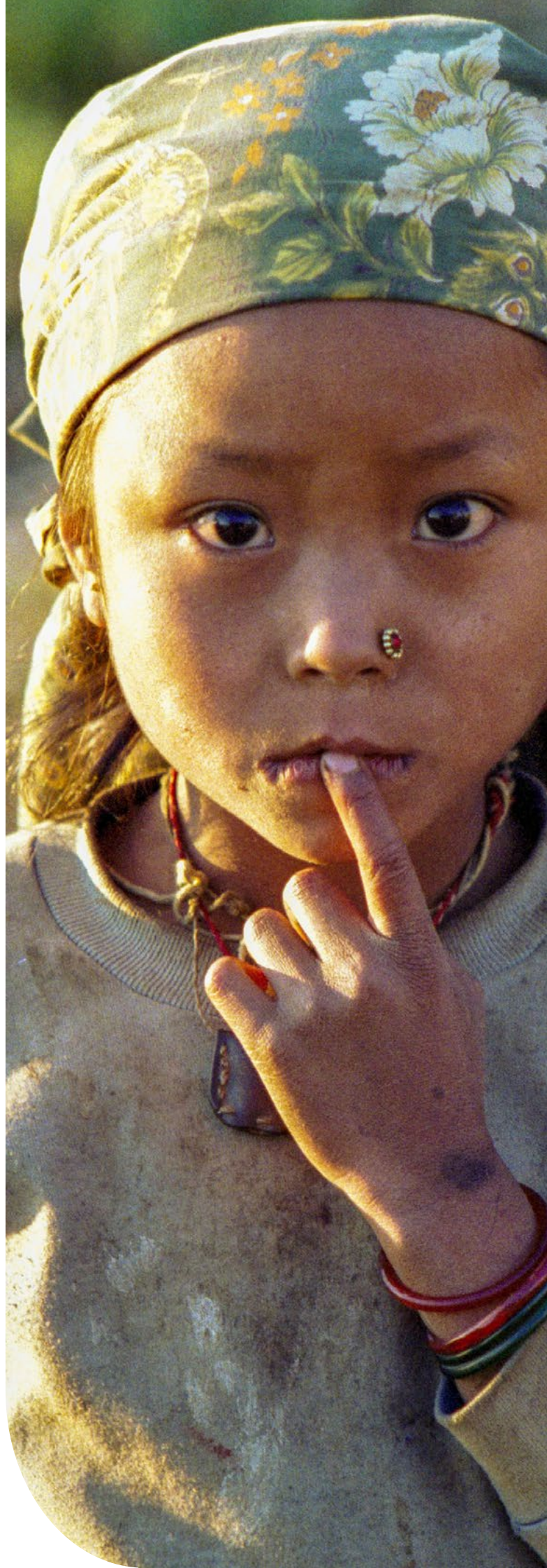


## **B. ALIGNMENT BETWEEN ASEAN AND THE BALI PROCESS**

Given that all ASEAN Member States and Dialogue Partners are also members of the Bali Process, greater coordination could be achieved through regular sharing of workplans, and reviewing any potential complementarity or duplication. This could be particularly relevant at present in work around addressing emerging forms of trafficking for forced criminality, particularly linked to the rise of online scam centres, which both institutions have active workplans around.

Additional areas worth exploring include:

- Bali Process Taskforce on Planning and Preparedness and ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) work together on humanitarian coordination and emergency response, including large-scale movements by sea. This could include conducting annual joint table top exercises to model safe disembarkation and screening for protection.
- A possible Bali Process Regional Support Office and AICHR joint initiative on human rights-based responses to maritime movements in ASEAN, including a thematic study and/or regional dialogue, which could work towards creating rights-based Standard Operating Procedures for emergency disembarkation, screening for protection needs and temporary protection systems.
- ASEAN Inclusive Business Forum and the Bali Process Government and Business Forum (GABF) holding a joint session focused on access to employment opportunities for migrants in irregular situations. This could explore ways to regularise migrants as a means of minimising their vulnerability to trafficking and related exploitation, with the ultimate goal of creating a network of Asia 'Business Champions on Refugee Employment'.







## 4. COUNTRY EXAMPLES: AUSTRALIA AND AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

While the activities in Section 3 are applicable across all Dialogue Partners, this section provides specific opportunities for Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. As ASEAN's first two Dialogue Partners, both countries have long-standing histories of engagement with ASEAN and are now among the countries holding Comprehensive Strategic Partnership status: the highest level of partnership with the organisation.<sup>20</sup> With each having recently adopted new Plans of Action, it is timely to explore alignment with refugee protection.

Both countries are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, and each made commitments at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, including to: "Support comprehensive protection and solutions strategies in the Asia-Pacific, and support States, including those who are smaller and emerging, to develop and strengthen their asylum systems and protection capacity" and "to champion the enhanced global issuance and acceptance of machine-readable refugee travel documents... [and] to build the technical capability of States to issue and accept machine-readable convention travel documents."<sup>21</sup>

### AUSTRALIA

To mark the 50th anniversary of this partnership in March 2024, Australia announced more than AUD 500 million in funding for a range of new and expanded initiatives to support shared priorities and add to the already extensive engagement under the ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.<sup>22</sup> The following recommendations are drawn from existing areas of expertise and known priorities in the Australia-ASEAN relationship, and are aligned with the 23 pledges Australia made at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum.

#### 1. Strengthen national asylum and protection capacity

- Work with interested ASEAN states to design, develop and financially support effective "temporary stay" arrangements for displaced persons, from registration and screening to access to health, education and employment or access to livelihoods.
- Facilitate technical exchanges with ASEAN immigration authorities on registration systems, case management, identity verification, and protection-sensitive screening and referral through existing immigration cooperation mechanisms.

## **2. Strategically link cooperation with resettlement policy**

- Consult with ASEAN on how to sustainably scale up Australia's resettlement and "complementary" pathways programs, such as:
  - Build on Australia's Train-to-Hire pilot with Malaysia by expanding similar employment-focused initiatives to other ASEAN states hosting refugees and investing in training infrastructure.
  - Expand scholarship opportunities to refugees residing in ASEAN countries such as through 'Australia for ASEAN' and 'Australia Awards' scholarship.
  - Scale up eligibility to refugees living across ASEAN Member States to the Refugee Student Settlement Pathway, and work with Member States to expand refugee eligibility to study at higher education institutions in ASEAN countries, which will assist in obtaining pre-requisite qualifications for these pathways.

## **3. Support the implementation of alternatives to immigration detention**

- Work with ACWC and ASEAN Member States to support implementation of forthcoming *ASEAN Guidelines on Implementation of Alternatives to Detention for Children in the Context of Migration*. This could include technical and financial support to ASEAN Member States to develop standard operating procedures, referral pathways, and information-sharing mechanisms, as well as ongoing monitoring and peer-learning.
- Expand immigration cooperation visits with ASEAN counterparts (eg. through DGICM engagement) to include alternatives to detention and community-based hosting models.

## **4. Support greater synergy between ASEAN and the Bali Process<sup>23</sup>**

- Work with Bali Process Co-Chair Indonesia to review alignment between the work of ASEAN and the Bali Process related to trafficking in persons and smuggling of migrants to ensure agendas are mutually reinforcing and avoiding duplication. This may include exploring opportunities listed above.

## **5. Addressing statelessness**

- Support peer-learning, research and provide targeted technical and financial assistance to ASEAN Member States to strengthen birth registration, digitisation and legal identity policies, and support regional policy dialogue on these issues under AICHR. These activities could be strategically linked to the above work on alternatives to immigration detention.

## **6. Continue to support ASEAN and other regional efforts to end violence in Myanmar**

- Support the work of the ASEAN Special Envoy on Myanmar to oversee the cessation of violence, delivery of humanitarian aid and the holding of inclusive dialogue, and support work to develop measurable indicators for the 5 Point Consensus. This could also be reinforced through engagement through the Bali Process and exploring new Myanmar-specific regional initiatives, as recommended by the recent Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs.<sup>24</sup>

## AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

Although Aotearoa New Zealand is more geographically isolated from ASEAN than Australia, the relationship is still very significant. Marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dialogue Relations in 2025, New Zealand began its Plan of Action to implement its Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), and also launched the 'ASEAN-New Zealand Vision Fund', of NZD 25 million over five years (2026–2030) to support that agenda.<sup>25</sup> New Zealand also supports the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in ASEAN through the five-year AMPLIFY program, which addresses the disproportionate impact of armed conflict and human security threats on women.<sup>26</sup>

### 1. Strengthen asylum and protection capacity:

- Incorporate protection-sensitive approaches into ongoing ASEAN Plus New Zealand SOMTC Consultations and ASEAN-New Zealand Transnational Organised Crime Capacity Uplift Initiative, including technical exchanges on registration systems, identity management safeguards, referral mechanisms, and inter-agency coordination to better manage mixed migration flows.
- Convene parliamentary exchanges and visits between New Zealand and ASEAN Member States to facilitate dialogue on migration governance, protection frameworks, and regional cooperation on forced migration, as agreed in the CSP Plan of Action activity 1.1.4.

### 2. Advancing education and skills development

- Utilise the ASEAN-New Zealand Vision Fund and existing development cooperation programmes to strengthen access to education for displaced and vulnerable communities through the Manaaki New Zealand Scholarship Programme.
- Support technical and vocational education and training to build skills and employment opportunities among both host and displaced and vulnerable populations in ASEAN, as in CSP Plan of Action activity 3.2.1.

### 3. Supporting secure identity systems and machine-readable documentation

- Provide technical assistance to ASEAN Member States to enhance civil registration systems, including birth registration and identity documentation.
- Support the development and implementation of machine-readable travel documentation and identity management systems to strengthen border integrity, reduce document fraud, and facilitate safe and lawful mobility.

### 4. Enhancing maritime preparedness and humanitarian coordination

- Support the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum by contributing to capacity-building and technical exchanges on protection-centred search and rescue operations and humanitarian coordination.
- Promote the inclusion of mixed migration scenarios in maritime cooperation exercises and dialogues, helping ASEAN Member States improve coordination and preparedness for irregular maritime movements that involve refugees and other vulnerable groups.

### 5. Strategically grow durable solutions and migration opportunities

- Work with the region to sustainably scale New Zealand's resettlement and "complementary" pathways programs, including through making community sponsorship a permanent and additional part of New Zealand's resettlement program, prioritising displaced persons in the ASEAN region.

### 6. Address the intersection between displacement, women, peace and security

- Incorporate displacement into existing Women, Peace and Security programming to better address the specific vulnerabilities faced by displaced women and girls and to promote their participation in peace, security, and community resilience efforts.



## ANNEX A: DIALOGUE PARTNER RATIFICATION STATUS OF RELEVANT INTERNATIONAL TREATIES

| Dialogue Partner         | 1951 Refugee Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees | 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees | Convention on the Rights of the Child |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Australia                | ✓                                                          | ✓                                                | ✓                                     |
| Canada                   | ✓                                                          | ✓                                                | ✓                                     |
| China                    | ✓                                                          | ✓                                                | ✓                                     |
| European Union*          | ✓                                                          | ✓                                                | ✓                                     |
| India                    | ✗                                                          | ✗                                                | ✓                                     |
| Japan                    | ✓                                                          | ✓                                                | ✓                                     |
| New Zealand              | ✓                                                          | ✓                                                | ✓                                     |
| Republic of Korea        | ✓                                                          | ✓                                                | ✓                                     |
| Russian Federation       | ✓                                                          | ✓                                                | ✓                                     |
| United Kingdom           | ✓                                                          | ✓                                                | ✓                                     |
| United States of America | ✗                                                          | ✓                                                | ✗<br>(signed not ratified)            |

\* All 27 European Union (EU) Member States have signed and ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, its 1967 Protocols and CRC.

# ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> ASEAN, 2025, [ASEAN Community Vision 2045: “Resilient, Innovative, Dynamic, and People-Centred ASEAN”](#), adopted at the 46<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit, May 26.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, 2026, [Refugee Data Finder](#), March 2026. Unofficial numbers are likely much higher.

<sup>4</sup> IOM, 2026, Thailand Strategic Plan for Cross-Border Flows from Myanmar: January-December 2026, page 7.

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR, 2026, [Figures at a Glance in Malaysia](#), April 9.

<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International Thailand, 2025, [Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Migrants](#), April 9.

<sup>7</sup> Sebastian Strangio, 2021, ‘[Malaysian FM calls for ‘soul searching: over ASEAN non-interference’](#)’ *The Diplomat*, 22 October; Julio Amador III, 2025, ‘[The Philippines’ ASEAN chairmanship 2026: From non-interference to non-indifference](#)’, *FACTS Asia*, 20 December.

<sup>8</sup> Only three ASEAN Member States are signatories: Cambodia, the Philippines and Timor Leste, and these states host a negligible number of refugees.

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR. 2026. ‘[2025 was deadliest year yet for maritime movements of Rohingya refugees](#)’, 17 April.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly Ng & Sardar Ronie, 2026, ‘[250 missing after migrant boat sinks in Indian Ocean](#)’ *BBC News*, 15 April.

<sup>11</sup> Hidetoshi Nishimura, 2017, [Snapshots of the ASEAN Story: ASEAN’s Strategic Policy Needs and Dialogue Partners’ Contributions](#), ASEAN @ 50 Volume 1: The ASEAN Journey: Reflections of ASEAN Leaders and Officials, page 315, April 21.

<sup>12</sup> ASEAN Secretariat, 10 April 2026, [How ASEAN Works with Its Partners](#).

<sup>13</sup> [ASEAN External Relations Overview](#).

<sup>14</sup> Bali Process Regional Support Office, 2025, ‘[Disaster and displacement in the Asia Pacific: new realities and challenges](#)’, 30 September; Alexandra Peard, 2023, ‘[Cyclone Mocha makes dire situation worse for millions of women and children in Myanmar](#)’ *UN Women Asia and the Pacific*, 22 May.

<sup>15</sup> Russia does not explicitly include this issue in its 2021–2025 Plan of Action, although human rights had been referenced as a cooperation area in its previous Plan of Action.

<sup>16</sup> OHCHR, 2026, [A “wicked problem” - Seeking human rights-based solutions to trafficking into cyber-scam operations in South East Asia](#), 20 February.

<sup>17</sup> The Republic of Korea instituted a travel ban for its citizens to parts of Cambodia known for housing scam centres in October 2025, and the UK and USA jointly imposed sanctions on 146 entities linked with the “Prince Group Transnational Criminal Organization” in Cambodia. See: Jaewoo Park, 2025, ‘[South Korea issues travel ban after nationals trapped in Cambodia scam centres](#)’ *Radio Free Asia*, 15 October, US Treasury, 2025, ‘[US and UK take largest action ever](#)

[targeting cybercriminal networks in Southeast Asia](#)’, 14 October.

<sup>18</sup> ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) [Five-Year Work Plan 2026-2030](#).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Hoang, Thi Ha, 2021, [The ASEAN-China Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: What’s in a name?](#) ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, November 24.

<sup>21</sup> UNHCR. 2026. [Pledges and contributions](#).

<sup>22</sup> Australian Embassy Indonesia, 2024, [Australia and ASEAN celebrate 50 years of partnership](#), Media Release, April 16; [Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership \(2025-2029\)](#), 27 July 2024.

<sup>23</sup> As Bali Process Co-Chair and oldest ASEAN Dialogue Partner, Australia is well positioned to lead in this area.

<sup>24</sup> Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, 2026, ‘[Democracy and human rights in Myanmar](#)’ March.

<sup>25</sup> [Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-New Zealand Comprehensive Strategic Partnership \(2026-2030\)](#) Government of New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade/ Manatu Aorere, 2025, [ASEAN & New Zealand Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Factsheet](#).

<sup>26</sup> The Asia Foundation, [AMPLIFY: About this project](#).

# ASIA DIALOGUE ON FORCED MIGRATION



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