

Refugee-led education in Indonesia

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Refugee-led education initiatives in West Java, Indonesia, show how refugee communities can work with supporters to overcome service gaps faced in host countries, demonstrating a community-led approach to refugee assistance that is empowering and sustainable.

Indonesia allows asylum seekers and refugees to live in the country until they can be resettled through the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, but does not offer any legal pathways for them to naturalise, and also prohibits them from working during their stay. Consequently some 14,000 asylum seekers and refugees live for years in a state of limbo in Indonesia while awaiting resettlement, with a lack of formal rights and limited access to services like education. Faced with the prospect of children missing years of schooling at a critical stage of their development, groups of Afghan Hazara refugees living in the Indonesian province of West Java have independently initiated a number of education centres to serve their community.

There are more initiatives like this in refugee communities across the globe than we realise. Providing capacity building and guidance to refugee-led initiatives to address challenges themselves, rather than simply doing it for them, is an approach which serves to empower refugees by making

use of their skills and experiences, while also delivering badly needed services in a responsive and cost-effective way. After all, it is refugees who know best the needs of their community and in most cases have the skills and experience required to serve them.

Cisarua, a small mountain town in West Java, just a few hours drive from Jakarta, has in recent years become the home of some 2,500 asylum seekers and refugees, mostly ethnic Hazaras from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. Unlike other refugees in Indonesia, who are often supported by international or local assistance groups, refugees in this area live independently in the community, largely relying on savings or remittances.

The movement of refugee-led education initiatives in Indonesia started in this small township with the Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre (CRLC), established in August 2014 by four Hazara men with media and business backgrounds. The project quickly attracted the attention of outside supporters from Australia, who founded Cisarua Learning Limited (CLL), a non-profit group that

June 2018

www.fmreview.org/economies

supports the centre. Following the success of the CRLC, two further refugee-led education hubs were opened in 2015 by different groups of Hazara refugees – the Refugee Learning Nest (RLN) and the Refugee Learning Centre (RLC). There are now five such education centres operating in the area, which are independent but all follow the same basic model established by CRLC.

Between them, the five learning centres serve approximately 300 children aged 5–16, as well as providing English education for adult refugees. Each centre is run by refugee volunteers, who fulfil administration, management and teaching roles. Modest fees charged to parents are supplemented by donations from benefactor groups or private individuals, usually from abroad or from expatriate communities living in Indonesia. Some of the centres have also formed strong relationships with international schools and civil society groups in Indonesia. Members of the community are often called upon to support the schools by lending their skills, whether in cleaning, maintenance or construction, and community members are heavily involved in decision making within the schools through regular meetings.

The curriculum has a distinct focus on English since refugees are hopeful they will be eventually resettled in an English-speaking country or one where it is a common lingua franca. Having a strong command of English will not only enable faster integration with a new host community but is also perceived to strengthen their chances of being accepted for resettlement. The use of English is also important for inclusivity; while most of the children, like their teachers, are ethnic Hazaras, there are also a number of students from Iraq, Myanmar and Sudan.

In addition to providing vital education for children, these centres also support a range of additional activities that benefit the wider refugee community. Depending on

the skills that refugee volunteers can offer, the centres support English classes for adults, sports programmes, community-based health workshops, vocational skills-sharing programmes, and arts and handicraft classes for women refugees.

One of the most popular activities in the learning centres is football, which is hugely popular with both students and teachers. Each centre has a coach who runs training sessions and matches, which are open to women and girls as well as men and boys. These activities act as community gatherings for both participants and spectators, and the benefit of such activities on the mental well-being of those involved should not be underestimated.

Besides the learning centres, there are a number of other notable refugee-led initiatives operating in the Cisarua area. The Refugee Women Support Group Indonesia is run by a young Hazara woman, and focuses on textiles and jewellery making. The group also conducts workshops on health (including reproductive health) and hygiene, sexual and gender-based violence, and family planning. The group sells their textile products in stalls in Jakarta and Australia through a Melbourne-based non-profit organisation.

Through such refugee-led initiatives volunteers are able to put their skills to use and make an impact on their community,



A young refugee volunteer teaches her students in the Refugee Learning Centre in Cisarua, Indonesia.

while gaining experience that may prove useful in securing employment once resettled. The learning centres also serve as community hubs, acting as much-needed places for socialisation and community activities. They give structure and hope to refugees' lives, offering social and mental health benefits to those living in uncertain and difficult circumstances.

Following these examples in Cisarua, in late 2017 a number of similar education centres emerged in Jakarta, a major urban hub for refugees living in the community in Indonesia.

Supporting grassroots initiatives

The extent of external support provided to each of the refugee education centres varies, with some receiving ad hoc financial support from private donors, and others having more structured support that extends to mentoring, guidance and capacity development.

As well as providing financing through fundraising efforts, the CLL benefactor group supports CRLC by connecting the centre's teachers with trainers and mentors via video link and field visits, and has provided them with cameras and media training, allowing them to document their activities and maintain an active social media presence. Leaders in the CRLC have also been highly effective at engaging local and international (in particular, Australian) media, and have a high profile in expatriate circles in Indonesia, Australia and elsewhere.

Same Skies, the Swiss-Australian non-governmental organisation (NGO) that supports RLN and RLC, provided start-up financing for the centres but now concentrates its efforts on building the capacity of refugee volunteers to develop the projects so they become largely self-sufficient. Same Skies volunteers conduct capacity-building workshops for school staff, on topics including teacher training, child protection, financial management, conflict resolution and first aid. This has helped the two schools improve their overall educational and managerial capacity, leading to the provision of better services, while also building the skills and confidence of the volunteers.

Same Skies also provides remote 'coaching' through regular video-link meetings to identify needs in the centres and provide appropriate guidance and support to the volunteer team. Providing guidance remotely is both cost-effective and a strategic choice – it avoids creating a permanent physical presence in the community and the dependency that can follow. Like CRLC, refugee volunteers at RLN and RLC make effective use of digital communications to engage with other refugees as well as foreign audiences. Same Skies has supported this by providing capacity development and guidance on digital marketing and fundraising strategies in order to enhance the centres' independent sustainability. As a result, RLC and RLN have been able to build an extensive international following and leverage it to attract donations through online crowd-funding campaigns.

Multilateral institutions such as UNHCR are also getting behind refugee-led models of assistance. UNHCR Malaysia's Social Protection Fund initiative supports a range of small-scale self-help projects which are developed and implemented by refugee groups. The fund has supported 320 projects, including income-generation projects, skills-training programmes and community service initiatives like community centres, sports and recreation halls, and day-care and shelters services.

Refugees who are involved in community initiatives like these demonstrate significant agency in their ability to come together to overcome obstacles they face, challenging the perception that they are helpless or in need of outside assistance. The refugee-led education initiatives of West Java, and the manner in which non-profit benefactor groups support them, show just how effective a model of refugee assistance this can be – one that empowers and builds resilience by utilising and developing the human capital that exists within the refugee community.

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