

**URBAN REFUGEES IN ASIA PACIFIC
RESILIENCY AND COPING STRATEGIES**

National consultations : Bangkok
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Introduction

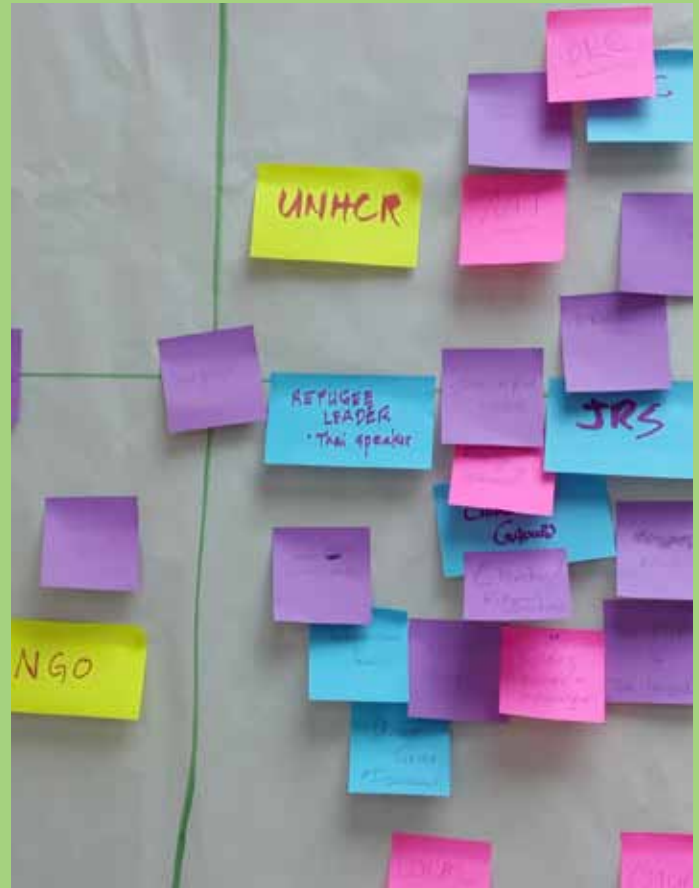
In 2012, APRRN collaborated with member organizations in Thailand, India, Malaysia, and Nepal to conduct the “Urban Refugees in Asia Pacific: Resiliency and Coping Strategies” pilot study. This research aimed to amplify refugees’ voices to raise more awareness about the particular challenges they face in a harsh, challenging and often exploitative environment by outlining several broad themes that reflect the distinct issues related to surviving in an urban setting. Like most countries in the region, none of the countries in which the research was conducted are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Furthermore, all four countries lack national legislation providing any legal protection to refugees, asylum seekers or stateless persons. Refugees in these countries are not allowed to work and face the constant threat of indefinite immigration detention if they are apprehended by authorities. However, despite the overwhelming barriers to living, the results of the study revealed that urban refugees overcome hardship through determination and demonstrate immense resilience.

Building upon the experiences portrayed through the pilot study, APRRN organized the first of four follow-up national consultations on 15-16 August in Bangkok, Thailand, with representatives from APRRN member organizations and a diverse group of refugee participants living in Bangkok in attendance. The goal of the consultations was to provide a platform for refugees to communicate their existing coping mechanisms to NGOs/service providers and to facilitate an open discussion about the best methods for strengthening the resiliency of urban refugees and mitigating the risks associated with some coping strategies.

In this report, we use the term refugee to encompass not only the people formally recognized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) but also asylum seekers and stateless persons.

II. Community

At the heart of every discussion, the most common expression from every refugee was the importance of 'community'. As a powerful force for coping, surviving, and thriving, communities of refugees provide social support and a sense of security and solidarity. Yet what was also emphasized throughout the consultation was the significance of connecting with local Thais, which for refugees struggling to adapt to a strange and unfamiliar place, is one of the best sources for surviving in an urban environment. Forming mutually beneficial relationships with locals helps refugees adjust to their circumstances with more confidence knowing that they can start rebuilding their lives in a more sustainable way.



Sticky notes from the stakeholder analysis session

III. Methodology

During the first day, participants were separated into two groups, refugees and translators in one group and NGO/service providers in another, to promote more openness from participants. Each session was led by an APRRN facilitator who facilitated the discussions and encouraged active contribution from each participant to ensure diverse perspectives would be represented in the dialogue.

Storyboard

Participants drew or wrote what a typical day is like for a refugee and described typical activities for the morning, afternoon, and evening. Participants were given the opportunity to share their results and explain their daily experiences.

Matrix

Common needs were identified from the

storyboard activity. Participants were asked how they would advise a refugee to meet that need by indicating what strategies are best for addressing each need.

Stakeholder analysis

Participants identified all the stakeholders relevant to the lives of refugees and placed each agent on a graph indicating level of power and level of helpfulness. The NGO/service providers also mapped the stakeholders relevant to NGOs along the same indicators.

Role reversal

After summarizing the results from the previous activities, the two groups switched rooms. Each group identified similarities and differences in the outcomes of the opposite group and discussed the gaps in perceptions within the broader context of increasing NGOs/service providers' understanding of the experiences of urban refugees.

During the second day, the sessions focused

on the coping strategies identified from the activities of the previous day to assess ways to mitigate risks while strengthening existing survival mechanisms.

Addressing gaps in understanding

Refugees shared their perceptions of where gaps existed in NGOs/service providers' understanding of the most important needs and coping mechanisms that are related to surviving in an urban setting. NGOs/service providers asked refugee participants questions to improve their knowledge of the resources refugees use to overcome challenges to meeting their needs.

Breakout groups

NGOs/service providers and refugees were divided into small mixed groups to discuss the risks involved with various coping strategies. Each group ranked the issues identified in the matrix exercise from the first day according to what was most important for survival and which areas were most manageable for refugees.

Strengthening resiliency

After each group presented their results, participants developed strategies that expand on the most successful coping mechanisms shared throughout the consultation. Participants discussed ideas for pilot projects that build upon the strengths of refugee communities and identified a pilot project for collaboration between refugees and NGOs.

IV. Existing Coping Strategies

Throughout the consultation, refugees identified several important survival needs and their strategies for accessing each need.

Language

Refugees identified Thai language skills as one of the most important survival tool for living in Bangkok. With a basic grasp of the Thai language, refugees are able to communicate with locals to buy food, navigate the city, learn about housing, and access many other basic needs. Language is also critical for making connections with the local Thai community and establishing friendly relations with neighbors. Thai language skills were seen as necessary to being able to explain their situations as refugees to their Thai neighbors, who could empathize and help with mitigating some of the security risks involved in living “illegally”.

Many refugees use Thai neighbors to help them learn the language. Some offer to teach English or other skills in exchange for Thai language lessons. Networking with the local community is not only one of the best ways to learn Thai but also impacts refugees' sense of security, access to information, and other issues vital to surviving in Thailand.

Food

For many refugees, finding affordable and appetizing food is a serious obstacle. While Thai food can be inexpensive and convenient, some refugees have cultural needs that are not easily met through a strictly Thai diet; yet maintaining cultural preferences poses an additional financial burden on already tight resources. To compensate, many refugees save money by buying basic ingredients from local Thai markets and rely on specialty markets for purchasing ingredients specific to their cultural tastes.

Although some charities offer subsidies to supplement meals, refugees noted that not only is too little to survive on, it is often only rice. Considering many refugees originate from countries where the main staple is bread, this is often not as significant of a contribution as one might think. To accom-

moderate for their food preferences, refugees cook meals at home and share dishes with neighbors and friends. They also rely on the solidarity of the community to provide common staples. For example, one refugee community pooled their money together to purchase a furnace. Some families contribute flour or other ingredients while others offer to help bake bread.

Another common challenge for Muslim refugees, observing a halal diet in a majority Buddhist country, is also met by connecting with their communities. While Bangkok has an Arab district catering to Muslim diets, refugees find the restaurants too expensive for their limited funds. Instead, many Muslim refugees reach out to the local Thai Muslim population as a resource for halal products.

By combining their resources as a community, refugees not only increase their ability to survive but also preserve their identities while adapting to a new culture.

Education

The education of children was identified as an important challenge faced by refugee communities. Although Thai national legislation established that all children, regardless of legal status, have a right to education, the reality of the system is far from practical for refugees. Thai schools typically offer rudimentary subjects in Thai, and most refugee children are not fluent enough to actually learn in Thai classes. The language gap is easier to overcome for very young children, but for the most children, receiving an education by attending a Thai school is nearly impossible.

While some refugees take advantage of the classes offered by NGOs, many expressed that this often falls short of their children's needs. Instead, many refugees rely on their local communities to educate children in math, English, and other subjects. Some

parents teach their children at home using books and educational materials sent from family members living abroad in resettlement countries. Another refugee started his own school by asking for the local refugee community to provide him with a room and other resources to teach children basic subjects in English. To supplement his scant resources, he reached out to churches and other charities to ask for more teaching materials. Similarly, other refugees relied on the skills of their local community by contacting both Thai and refugee teachers to give lessons to their children.

Employment/Income

Employment and income opportunities seem to vary among different communities. While some refugees receive money sent from home or abroad through wire transfers, political instability often results in financial services shutting off access to money transfer assistance. Others rely on external means of financial support through charity organizations and NGOs. Rather than relying on outside sources, some refugees have well-established communities with stronger local support for finding work, room and board, and other economic opportunities.

However, as “illegal” residents in a country that does not recognize their right to work, refugees also stressed the security concerns of working outside the home. To address this issue and to minimize their risks, refugees share information with fellow refugees about employers who are willing to hire “illegal” workers but often the pay is insufficient for supporting a family.

Housing

Housing options for refugees are usually crowded and limited, especially for refugees who have large families. Refugees have used internet sources to find housing, and better connected communities have ac-

cess to networks to locate housing. Some refugee communities strategically reside in spread out areas in Bangkok to address safety concerns, as security risks can sometimes increase when many refugees live together. Yet other refugees live in same area as a way to maximize support and resilience. Refugees acknowledge the importance of being friendly with the Thai community and avoiding anything that would make them feel insecure. By respecting Thais and obeying the cultural norms of the locals, these refugees are seen as “neighbors” and are accepted by Thais as members of the community.

Health

Health care assistance is one of the more difficult obstacles to overcome in Bangkok. Many refugees have language problems at local Thai hospitals, and costs are extremely high at international hospitals that are more accessible and offer better services.

Some have used their relationships with the Thai community to help with the language barrier. One Thai neighbor even offered to take a refugee child to the hospital as a “relative” so that the expenses would be considerably less under her Thai national insurance plan. Other refugees have a collective fund that can be used when someone in their community has a medical emergency.

Communities also support each other in preventative care, like avoiding smoking and drinking, getting exercise, and being extra cautious traveling around the city, as a method for staying healthy.

Information

Access to important information is often assisted with the help of local Thais and community connections. Refugees are able to connect through mobile phones using “What’s App”, “Facebook”, email and text.

The Thai community and phone applications are used to obtain directions, information regarding visas, etc. Some refugees rely on public notice boards or flyers to gather information about NGOs and community services available.

Isolation/Boredom

Refugees experience stress, isolation, and boredom while living in Bangkok. There are many coping strategies that were addressed in this area. Refugees spend their free time on the internet, playing with their children, exercising, and meeting with each other in the community. Other methods mentioned by refugees included relying on religion and prayer, reading and window-shopping in the malls to avoid stress. Refugees mention the importance of social media and “Skype” as means to keep in touch with family and friends.

“All of us need a lot of support... All of us, we have to stay positive. You cannot, we cannot, survive by being negative. There is no choice. ... Just because we are positive, well, we cannot survive without support and positivity, but that doesn’t mean that our lives are going well or comfortable.”

IV. Key Outcomes

Increasing refugee voices

At the end of the first day, refugees and NGOs/service providers switched rooms to review one another’s results. Refugees generally agreed that there was a distinct difference between the ways NGOs/service providers perceive their situation and how refugees actually live. Refugees felt that the NGOs/service providers were unaware of the ways in which refugees collaborate and share experiences as their main source of surviving. This was a major contrast in what they saw on the boards between them thinking that isolation was practiced more than organizing as a community. After seeing their boards, the NGOs/service providers were interested in how refugee communi-

ties are learning from each other. Many participants were able to see the differences between what they perceived for a refugee and what a refugee actually perceived. These observations by both groups would then become the basis for bridging the gap between the two groups.

Agency and support

For refugees at the consultation, there were many common themes that occurred when they were able to map stakeholders on the power analysis board. For all refugees groups, UNHCR was seen as very powerful, but there was disagreement on the helpfulness of UNHCR. This could be due to the different experiences each individual has with the organization. Police, security authorities, and immigration offices were all seen as very powerful in influencing their lives, but they were all universally seen as not being very helpful. Media was viewed as helpful, even if not overly powerful. Finally, local Thais were considered extremely

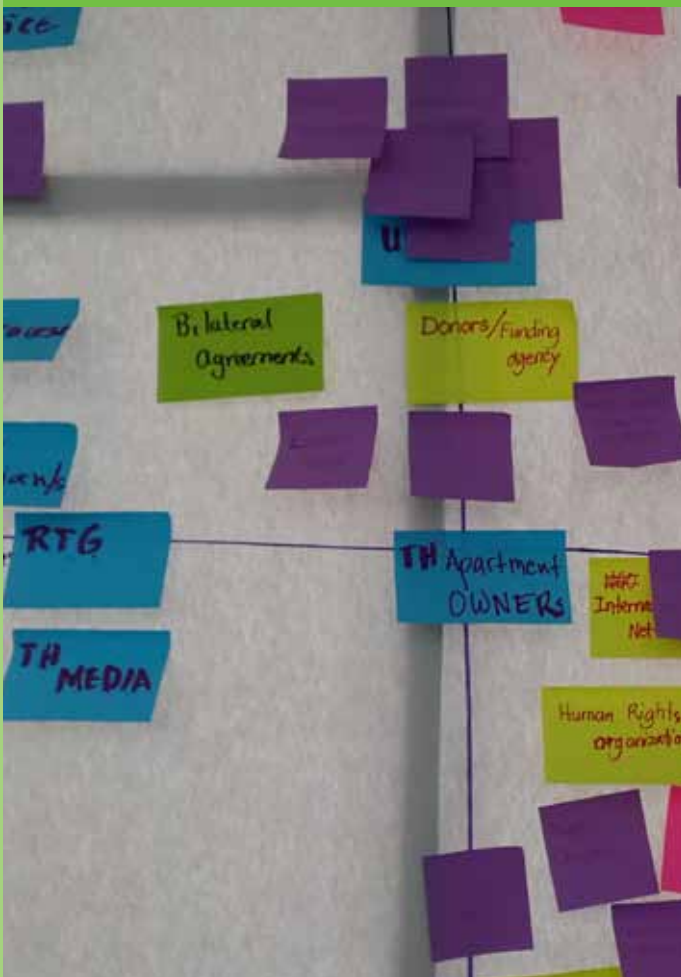
helpful and actually quite powerful. Communities and individuals help the most, but they can only help the refugees survive, but not reach their ultimate goal of resettlement.

For the NGOs/service providers, there were common correlations between what stakeholders refugees found powerful and helpful and what the NGOs/service providers perceived the stakeholders refugees found powerful and helpful. From the perspective of the refugee, the NGOs/service providers also found that Thai speakers, local schools, Thai neighbors, community, landlords, religious groups, and family abroad were not powerful, but extremely helpful. The Thai government, police, immigration officers, and the international media were all seen as being very powerful but ultimately unhelpful, and even hindering, to refugees' wellbeing.

Strengths and risks

When the consultation was broken up into several smaller groups, mixed with both NGOs/service providers and refugees, participants identified which needs were most important, which were riskiest and which were easiest to attain independently. By first outlining the most significant self-supporting survival mechanisms, groups were able to go into detail about the best strategies for obtaining housing, finding work, addressing security concerns, education, food, health, and language barriers, as well as address more personalized concerns for these areas.

At the end of the consultation, a collaboration to develop strategies to strengthen the existing coping mechanisms between NGOs/services providers and refugees was in full swing. The united group began to find solutions together. Together, the group decided that the top areas to address were income generating activities /employment, role of the local Thai community, recreation-



al activities, and food.

D. Developing a course of action

The last part of the consultation was devoted to the development of an action plan. Mapping skills (educational and vocational) as well as ideas relating to the key priority areas was proposed, with refugees present at the consultation taking the lead to connect with other refugees and refugee communities to undertake the mapping.

The mapping was to provide an idea of skills that exist within the refugee community, enabling the refugee communities to share these skills and experiences.

The ideas to address the key areas identified would provide a snapshot of possibilities, enabling not only the refugee communities but also NGOs and other stakeholders to be able to consider innovative ways to support the resilience of the refugee.

V. Conclusion

The proceedings and the action plan that was drawn up was seen by the refugee participants as timely and very welcome. The NGO participants found the consultations useful as a tool to address gaps and strategize innovatively to strengthen the agency of the refugee.

APRRN has consistently promoted and advocated for refugee voices to be the center of programming and advocacy. This consultation was a step in deepening the active involvement of refugee voices in solutions that affect them and their future. The success of the consultation forms the basis for a template that could be used in other countries.

We are hopeful that the initiative that has been sparked by the consultation finds expression in projects that contribute to the ability of refugee communities to access livelihood options and strengthen other coping mechanisms, and also enable policy change that would make such options mainstream.