ADSP
Asia Displacement Solutions Platform

ADSP Briefing Note

Exploring Intra-Regional Complementary Pathways for Refugees in South and Southeast Asia

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Introduction

Over the past decade, complementary pathways have increasingly been considered as a promising approach to expanding access to solutions for refugees worldwide. As a complement to more established durable solutions of voluntary repatriation, resettlement, and local integration, some have portrayed complementary pathways as 'win-win' mechanisms that benefits refugees and host states[1], while others have also highlighted potential limitations.[2] This briefing note examines the potential benefits of expanding complementary pathways for refugees, focusing in particular on *intra-regional* options within South and Southeast Asia and qualification/skill-based pathways. This is followed by an examination of the benefits and current obstacles to expanding complementary pathways and a discussion of steps to address them. The briefing note concludes with policy recommendations for government, donors, international agencies, and other humanitarian stakeholders in the region.

This briefing note was informed by a detailed desk review conducted between February and April 2026 of existing literature, policies, programs, and other sources of information on complementary pathways.[3] In addition, 15 key informant interviews were conducted in March 2026 with stakeholders representing international and non-governmental organizations across the Asia region, including several refugees with direct experience with regional complementary pathway programs, to gain insights into current realities and future possibilities for implementing and expanding intra-regional complementary pathways. Due to limited time and access, government representatives were not included amongst the key informants interviewed.

Section 1: Conceptualizing Intra-Regional Complementary Pathways within South and Southeast Asia

Defining 'Complementary Pathways' and 'Intra-Regional Complementary Pathways'

In the 2010s, complementary pathways gained prominence as a mechanism considered to increase opportunities for refugees and achieve more equitable responsibility sharing. Building on an "acknowledgement of the failure of existing durable solutions to meet all refugees' needs," the identification of other mobility or migration opportunities which could provide refugees with sustainable protection became an increasingly significant area of interest.[4] In 2018, this focus was solidified into a global commitment to expand the availability of complementary pathway opportunities to facilitate access to protection and solutions for refugees in the Global Compact on Refugees.[5] This was followed by the implementation of the multistakeholder Three-Year Strategy (2019–2021) on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways[6] and subsequently the Third Country Solutions for Refugees: Roadmap 2030.[7]

In its 2024 Operational Guidelines on Complementary Pathways, UNHCR defines these as, "migration pathways with refugee-specific flexibilities built in that allow refugees and others in need of international protection to access work, study and other opportunities outside of their country of asylum, while their international protection needs are respected. Complementary pathways can also take the shape of programs created specifically for refugees and others in need of international protection to access opportunities internationally outside of UNHCR-assisted resettlement."[8] Although not durable solutions in themselves, complementary pathways can bring medium-to long-term stability and protection as part of a "progressive approach to solutions."[9]

[1] Global Compact on Refugees. *Complementary Pathways: A Win-Win for Refugees and Host Communities*, May 2025.
[2] See for example: Jeff Crisp. *"Labour mobility programmes for refugees: origins, benefits and limitations"*, March 2026. RLI Blog on Refugee Law and Forced Migration.
[3] Research and drafting for this briefing note was led by Paul Vernon, ADSP's Regional Advocacy Specialist, with input from members and partners.
[4] Church World Service. *The Future of Refugee Resettlement & Complementary Pathways: Strengthening Sustainable and Strategic Humanitarian Solutions for Refugees*, October 2020, p. 27.
[5] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). *Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees: Part II–Global Compact on Refugees*, Sept. 2018, para 94.
[6] UNHCR. Final Report: The Three-Year Strategy (2019-2021) on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways, March 2022.
[7] UNHCR. Third Country Solutions for Refugees: Roadmap 2030, June 2022.
[8] UNHCR. Operational Guidelines on Complementary Pathways, June 2024, p. 11–12.
[9] UNHCR. Complementary Pathways for Admission of Refugees to Third Countries: Key Considerations, April 2019, p.7.

For displaced populations in South and Southeast Asia, complementary pathways encompass any programs or pathways outside (and in addition to) resettlement that provide safe routes to move and legally stay in a third country. This includes qualification/skills-based pathways (such as labor pathways and education pathways) rights/dependency-based pathways (such as family reunification pathways), needs-based pathways (such as humanitarian pathways), and sponsorship-based pathways (such as community sponsorship programs).[10] This does not, however, comprise movements from the country of origin to the country of asylum. Access to complementary pathways is limited to those who meet the pathway-specific eligibility requirements and criteria. Consequently, complementary pathways generally target a different profile of refugees from resettlement, which often prioritizes the most vulnerable cases with the highest protection needs.[11] One of the guiding principles informing the implementation of complementary pathways has been the principle of 'additionality', which emphasizes that "complementary pathways are additional to resettlement and should lead to an overall net increase in the number of third-country solutions for refugees."[12]

For this briefing note, intra-regional pathways are defined as any complementary pathway in which the origin and destination countries are within South and Southeast Asia. This encompasses the 8 member states of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the 11 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Support for these pathways may be provided by actors from other regions, who can provide guidance, establish partnerships with relevant regional institutions, or provide resources and funds to facilitate intra-regional complementary pathway programs.

Mapping Complementary Pathways for Refugees in Asia

In 2024, UNHCR recorded a total of 1,785 Myanmar refugees departing on complementary pathways from Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and other countries of asylum.[13] In comparison, in 2024, 31,900 refugees from Myanmar were submitted for resettlement by UNHCR, with 10,100 resettlement departures recorded.[14] A large proportion of complementary pathway departures were towards Canada, the United States, and Australia, which have also historically been the largest destination countries for the resettlement of refugees.[15]

Australia

Within the Asia region, Australia has made the largest commitment towards expanding complementary pathways, pledging at the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023 to "gradually increase community-sponsored and other complementary places to 10,000 per year over time, additional to the core humanitarian intake."[16] Although limited progress has been made on achieving this ambitious pledge (approximately 500 additional places per year have been established as of 2025), refugees from Myanmar have accessed the Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot (which offered 500 places for primary applicants from 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2026) and family reunification pathways to Australia. Refugees from Myanmar have also accessed the Refugee Student Settlement Pathway and the Community Refugee Settlement and Integration Pilot (Australia's flagship community-led refugee settlement program), though these programs are currently categorized as pathways within Australia's 'Humanitarian Program' and thus are not additional and 'complementary' to resettlement.[17] Australia is also currently implementing the 'Train-to-Hire Framework in Asia Pacific' project, which aims to develop a market-oriented, train-to-hire model that will build the skills of selected refugee candidates and match them with international employment opportunities.[18] Malaysia has been selected as the pilot country from which the initial cohort of refugees will be selected.

[10] UNHCR. Operational Guidelines on Complementary Pathways, June 2024, p. 13-16.
[11] UNHCR. UNHCR Thailand Help – Resettlement, (accessed 6 March 2026).
[12] UNHCR. Third Country Solutions for Refugees: Roadmap 2030, June 2022, p. 9.
[13] UNHCR. Myanmar situation overview – Global Report 2024, (accessed 6 March 2026).
[14] Ibid.
[15] Key Informant Interview, 2 March 2026.
[16] Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA). "Australian Government makes 23 pledges at 2023 Global Refugee Forum", February 2024.
[17] RCOA. A Complementary Pathways Program for Australia: A Vision and Roadmap to Achieve 10,000 Complementary Pathways Places for Refugees by 2030, May 2025.
[18] International Organization for Migration (IOM) Australia. Train-to-Hire Framework in the Asia-Pacific Region, (accessed 6 March 2026).

Japan

Another notable destination country within the Asia region for complementary pathways is Japan. Building on their experience in supporting education pathways for refugees from Syria and Ukraine since 2017, the Japan ICU Foundation educational foundation and the Pathways Japan NGO have held discussions on expanding education pathways for refugees from Myanmar[19] and convened in June 2025 a Global Task Force on Third Country Education Pathways Community of Practice meeting at Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand.[20] During the meeting, participants discussed "how to make higher education more accessible to Burmese refugees across the region", including through the establishment of new education pathways to Japan from Thailand.[21] In addition, in 2023 UNHCR piloted the Japanese Initiative for Education pathway with the Japan International Cooperation Agency to allow Rohingya refugees to obtain graduate degrees in Japan.[22]

Current Intra-Regional Complementary Pathway Programs in South and Southeast Asia

Very few intra-regional complementary pathway programs have been developed to date in which both the countries of departure and destination are in South and Southeast Asia. Two notable exceptions are the Philippines' Complementary Pathways Program and the European Union Mobility Program in Myanmar (EMPM). These programs represent two distinct approaches to developing complementary pathway programs: a program specifically designed for refugees and the calibrated adjustment of a mobility pathway to make it more viable for refugees to use.

Intra-Regional Education Mobility Pathway - Philippines Complementary Pathways Program

After pledging to explore complementary pathways for admitting refugees in the 2019 Global Refuge Forum, the Philippines developed and began implementing the pilot program in 2022.[23] This landmark initiative has since provided 25 Rohingya youth with a "safe and regulated avenue of admission and stay" in the Philippines through education across 7 partner universities.[24] While the initial cohorts of students departed from Malaysia, the latest group in 2025 includes Rohingya departing from Bangladesh. In the Philippines, the program is supported by a whole-of-government approach involving ten ministries and an inter-agency coordination mechanism to support service provision and assistance. Upon completion of their degree, graduates of the program are reportedly offered the opportunity to remain in the Philippines upon graduation, with the right to work and a pathway to permanent residency, naturalization, and integration into Filipino society.[25]

Intra-Regional Education Mobility Pathway - European Union Mobility Program in Myanmar (EMPM)

The European Union Mobility Program for Myanmar (EMPM) is a pilot project implemented from 2023 to 2026 by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) funding organization, the Campus France national agency, and the Nuffic non-profit organization. EMPM aims to "provide educational and training opportunities to young students, with the specific objective of enhancing student mobility opportunities to ASEAN member states."[26] 'ASEAN Physical Mobility' is one of the main components of the program, through which students from Myanmar whose higher education has been disrupted since March 2020 can transfer their credits and continue their studies at one of the 32 'host' universities and higher education institutions in ASEAN (located in Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines) that EMPM has partnered with.[27] Rather than establishing new pathways, the project built on existing networks and mobility pathways established by universities within ASEAN that have supported intra-regional cross-border studies.

[19] University of Tokyo. Roundtable on Education Pathways for Burmese and Rohingya Refugees in Japan, April 2025.
[20] Japan ICU Foundation. JICUF Co-Hosts a Conference on Refugee Education at Payap University in Chiang Mai, Thailand, June 2025.
[21] SkillPath. Innovation in Refugee Education on the Thai-Myanmar Border, June 2025.
[22] UNHCR. Annual Results Report: 2023 Bangladesh, May 2024.
[23] UNHCR. PH Pledges Commitment in First Global Refugee Forum, December 2019.
[24] UNHCR. Philippines welcomes Rohingya refugees through complementary pathways programme, September 2022.
[25] Ibid.
[26] German Academic Exchange Services (DAAD). European Union Mobility Programme for Myanmar (EMPM), (accessed 6 March 2026).
[27] European Union Mobility Programme for Myanmar. Infographic - Partner Institutions in Higher Education, (accessed 6 March 2026).

Although this project was not specifically targeted at refugees, applications were open to students residing outside Myanmar. Of the approximately 850 students who have received scholarships through the project, approximately half were residing outside of Myanmar at the time of application, predominantly in Thailand, though some students were residing in India, UAE, and elsewhere.[28] Accepted applicants for the EMPM received "support with travel, visa, financial matters, housing, and logistics" to continue their higher education.[29] Students who have completed their studies are given a lump-sum 'mobility allowance' but are not mandated to return to their country of origin.[30]

Section 2: Benefits of Intra-Regional Complementary Pathways

Education Pathways

By enabling refugees to access higher education opportunities in ASEAN member states, education mobility programs such as EMPM and Philippines' Complementary Pathways Program foster an inclusive approach to migration management that empowers refugees through equitable access to quality education. This approach, as former Assistant Secretary of the Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs, Kira Azucena, says, "provides beneficiaries with a deeper and more substantive form of assistance that will help them be self-reliant."[31] A key informant familiar with Philippines' Complementary Pathways Program emphasized the transformative impact the program has already had in fostering hope, dignity, and a sense of purpose.[32] One of the initiatives undertaken by the Rohingya students in the program, for example, has been to establish their own refugee-led organization, Rohingya Youth Unite PH, to provide a self-sustaining support system for current and future students in the program.[33] Rohingya Youth Unite PH has also endeavored to pass on the skills and knowledge they gained during their studies, such as by developing a digital course to provide computer literacy training for Rohingya youth.[34]

Enabling refugees to access intra-regional education mobility pathways is aligned with regional education mobility initiatives such as the Asian International Mobility for Students Program (AIMS) managed by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO RIHED), and the ASEAN University Network's student mobility initiative,[35] which both seek to foster a stronger regional ASEAN identity, strengthen adaptability and communication skills, and equip students with intercultural competencies.[36]

Access to intra-regional mobility pathways would also build on and complement domestic education pathways, which have, for example enabled Rohingya women to access higher education opportunities in Bangladesh. The Asian University for Women (AUW) has provided scholarships to Rohingya women since 2017, including 369 students in the 2025-2026 school year who were able to leave the camps in Cox's Bazar to reside and study in Chittagong, Bangladesh.[37] However, many of the Rohingya graduates are unable to pursue further education opportunities, especially abroad, due to a lack of documentation and have had to return to the camps.[38] Establishing intra-regional education pathways would enable Rohingya AUW graduates to continue their learning and further build their resilience and self-reliance.

Labor Pathways

In addition to education pathways, enabling refugees to access intra-regional labor mobility pathways can yield significant benefits.

[28] Key Informant Interview, 4 March 2026.
[29] DAAD, European Union Mobility Programme for Myanmar (EMPM), (accessed 6 March 2026).
[30] Ibid.
[31] UNHCR. Philippines welcomes Rohingya refugees through complementary pathways programme, September 2022.
[32] Key Informant Interview, 1 March 2026.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Rohingya Youth Unite Philippines. Official Facebook Page of Rohingya Youth United PH, (accessed 6 March 2026).
[35] Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat. The Future of Higher Education Student Mobility in Southeast Asia: Possibilities for an Intra-ASEAN Scholarship Programme, (April 2025), pg. 9.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Asian University for Women. AUW Welcomes 1,968 Students Back to Campus, October 2025.
[38] Key Informant Interview, 4 March 2026.

Benefits of Enabling Refugees to Access Work Opportunities Aligned with their Skills

Due to restrictions around their ability to access formal employment and limited recognition of their skills and credentials, refugees in the region are often only able to access the informal sector, restricted to low-skilled '3D jobs' (dirty, dangerous, and difficult work),[39] or registered as workers under low-skill labor categories despite possessing professional backgrounds and specialized work experience.[40] This has led to a significant mismatch between the skills and expertise that refugees already possess and the employment opportunities they can access or pursue.[41]

Studies on the impact of granting work rights to refugees in Malaysia[42] and Thailand[43] have convincingly shown that enabling refugees to access legal work opportunities more aligned with their skills leads to increased worker productivity and consumption, greater business activity and investment, and higher overall government revenue through higher tax and social security contributions. By tapping into the existing talent pool of Myanmar refugees, businesses can address labor market shortages and benefit from the diverse skills, resilience, and cultural diversity that refugees possess. This is particularly relevant given the increasing proportion of former professionals, students, and middle-class individuals who comprise the population displaced from Myanmar over the last five years.[44]

Recent Regional Developments in Extending Formal Work Rights to Refugees

Some refugee hosting governments in Southeast Asia have taken noticeable steps in recent months towards extending formal work rights to categories of refugees. On 26 August 2025, the Royal Thai Government adopted a landmark resolution allowing working-age refugees from the nine camps along the Thai-Myanmar border to access legal employment from 1 October 2025 for an initial period of one year.[45] Meanwhile, in Malaysia, the Ministry of Human Resources has been working to finalize mechanisms that may allow refugees registered under the Refugee Registration Document (DPP) program to work legally.[46]

Understandably, discussions in both countries have focused on how refugees can be incorporated into domestic industries. In this connection, some scholars have drawn inspiration from global complementary pathway programs, such as Canada's Economic Mobility Pathways Pilot and Italy's University Corridors for Refugees, to propose immediate policy reforms to integrate skilled refugees into national labor markets and higher education institutions.[47] However, further consideration should also be given to examining whether and how granting the right to work to refugees can provide a basis for expanded intra-regional labor mobility pathways.

Alignment of Intra-regional Labor Pathways with the ASEAN Connectivity Agenda

The development of intra-regional complementary labor pathways would contribute significantly to ASEAN's connectivity agenda, which aims to foster strengthened people-to-people linkages across the region. In the ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Plan covering 2026 to 2035, 'People-to-People Connectivity' is identified as one of the six 'Strategic Areas' to be supported by the promotion and facilitation of greater labor mobility across the ASEAN region.[48] As part of the ASEAN Connectivity Agenda, Malaysia launched, as ASEAN Chair, the ASEAN Year of Skills; this led to the adoption of the 'Joint Statement on Skills Development for the Future Workforce in ASEAN', which committed to "facilitate workforce mobility across ASEAN by strengthening and promoting mechanisms to recognise skills of ASEAN workers."[49]

[39] South-China Morning Post. Malaysia's plan to give refugees its worst jobs amounts to a human rights 'facade': activists, November 2023.
[40] Htet Pwint Phyu, Misclassified and Unprotected: Survival Migration from Myanmar and the Limits of Thailand's Pink Card System, August 2025.
[41] Key Informant Interview, 3 March 2026.
[42] Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs. Economic Impact of Granting Refugees in Malaysia the Right to Work, April 2019,
see also Protecting Refugees in Asia (PRiA). Understanding the Current and Potential Contribution of Rohingya Refugees to the Malaysian Economy, May 2023.
[43] Myanmar Response Network and the Center of Excellence in Econometrics, Chiang Mai University. Study on the Economic and Social Impact of Granting Work Rights to Refugees in Thailand: A Case Study of Tak, Chiang Mai and Bangkok, July 2025.
[44] Nyi Nyi Kyaw and Sirada Khemanitthathai. Student Migration from Myanmar to Thailand after the 2021 Coup, February 2026, pg.6.
[45] UNHCR. As aid declines, legal work offers hope to refugees in Thailand, February 2026.
[46] The Malaysian Reserve. Malaysia to legalise refugee workers to fill labour gaps, September 2025.
[47] Htet Pwint Phyu. Misclassified and Unprotected: Survival Migration from Myanmar and the Limits of Thailand's Pink Card System, August 2025.
[48] ASEAN Secretariat. ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Plan, February 2026.
[49] ASEAN. Joint Statement on Skills Development for the Future Workforce in ASEAN, October 2025.

Recent initiatives such as the ASEAN Business Advisory Council's ASEAN Talent Development and Mobility Initiative, the alignment of national qualifications through the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework, and the commitments in the ASEAN Vientiane Declaration on Skills Mobility, Recognition and Development for Migrant Workers provide entry points for facilitating increased skilled worker mobility in ASEAN.[50]

Such expanded ASEAN worker mobility schemes could present opportunities for refugees. Moreover, opening regional skills recognition mechanisms and labor mobility opportunities to highly skilled refugees and professionals from Myanmar would unlock their full potential and maximize their contribution to sustainable national and regional development. This is particularly relevant if the extension of work rights and permits to refugees in Malaysia or Thailand is restricted to certain sectors. In these scenarios, intra-regional labor mobility pathways would enable skilled refugees with professional backgrounds to access work opportunities in other countries in the region where their capacities could be more effectively used.

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)

For refugees who are not immediately able to access skilled labor pathways, the delivery of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programs can play an important role in enabling refugees to acquire the skills and competencies they need. Two positive examples of TVET programs for refugees in the region have been developed in Bangladesh and Indonesia.

Building on the endorsement in 2022 of the 'Government of Bangladesh - United Nations Framework on Skills Development for Rohingya refugees and host communities,'[51] ILO, IOM, and UNHCR "have created and operationalized the first-ever competency-based skills development framework for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh."[52] This has led to the development of standardized training packages and courses that are "[aligned] with the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework to enable labour mobility" and have been accessed as of March 2025 by more than 5,500 Rohingya refugees.[53] Meanwhile, in Indonesia the Ministry of Manpower issued, in 2023, a Circular Note permitting refugee participation in skills training programs at government training centres, and initiatives such as UNHCR's Digital Livelihoods Project have provided refugees with digital skills training, internships, and job readiness support to strengthen refugees' employability and ability to access labour mobility pathways.[54]

While the TVET programs for refugees in Bangladesh and Indonesia are not specifically designed to facilitate intra-regional labor pathways within South and Southeast Asia, participants in these programs are nevertheless gaining skills in economic sectors in which countries in the region are experiencing labor shortages or have identified as priority areas of future growth. As such, TVET programs have the potential of equipping refugees with skills that can facilitate their chances of accessing complementary pathways. Conversely, enabling graduates of these programs to access intra-regional labor pathways would deliver a significant boost to the economies of the countries they move to. For instance, as part of the Digital Livelihoods Project in Indonesia, refugee participants earned national skill competency certifications in caregiving, a sector experiencing increasing demand in South and Southeast Asia due to rapid ageing.[55] Similarly, one of the competency-based training courses offered to refugees in Bangladesh was on 'Solar PV installation and maintenance', which is an area experiencing significant growth as countries in the region transition towards a 'green economy'.[56]

[50] Fulcrum. Facilitating Gainful Labour Migration in Southeast Asia Remains an Elusive Task, June 2025.
[51] Government of Bangladesh and United Nations, Government of Bangladesh- United Nations Framework on Skills Development for Rohingya Refugees/ FDMNs and Host Communities, August 2022.
[52] International Labor Organization (ILO). ILO supports first-ever competency-based skills development for Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, March 2025.
[53] Ibid.
[54] UNHCR. Refugees in Indonesia Build Hope and Skills through UNHCR's Job Readiness Support for Refugees Program, November 2025.
[55] UNHCR Innovation. Begin with the end in mind: Reducing barriers to refugees' access to work, November 2025.
[56] Krungsri. Rooftop Solar: Global Clean Energy Trends and Investment Opportunities in Thailand, January 2025.

Scaling Complementary Labor Pathways

One of the most promising aspects of complementary labor pathways is their potential to be scaled up with sufficient investment in the necessary infrastructure and funding mechanisms. To achieve financial sustainability for these pathways, there is a need for appropriate funding mechanisms that can reduce costs for the government, employers, and donors. Revolving fund mechanisms are one potential funding approach that could be considered, whereby employers and donors[57] supporting complementary pathways can recoup costs through deferred payments or income-sharing agreements.[58]

An innovative case study illustrating how this may be implemented is Robo Co-op, a refugee-led cooperative based in Japan that has been piloting digital labor pathways for refugees. Robo Co-op has adopted a train-to-hire and hire-to-move model in which recruited refugees receive digital training and remote work opportunities, and are then supported in accessing digital nomad visas.[59] Robo Co-op has been working to develop partnerships with impact investors who will pay the upfront costs of training, which refugees whose income increases repay as part of a pay-it-forward model to support training for future cohorts.[60] Further examination of the viability of such models could be initiated by regional actors such as the Asian Development Bank, the ASEAN TVET Council and the ASEAN Confederation of Employers.

Addressing Irregular Overland and Maritime Movement

Complementary pathways can also be mobilized as a component of a solutions-oriented approach to address the irregular movement of refugees seeking to leave Bangladesh and arrive in Southeast Asia. From 1 January 2022 to 31 January 2026, an estimated 7,500 refugees embarked on dangerous sea journeys from Bangladesh seeking protection, family reunification, and access to livelihoods and education.[61] In 2025, the Andaman Sea route was the deadliest in the world, with one out of every seven people undertaking the journey reported as dead or missing (892 people in total).[62]

Intra-regional complementary pathways from Bangladesh to Southeast Asia would undercut trafficking networks and reduce demand for smuggling networks and related transnational crime. As the inaccessibility of regular pathways is one of the primary drivers of irregular movement,[63] intra-regional pathways would address some of the root causes that have been driving the increasing number of departures of Rohingya from Bangladesh, including educated Rohingya youth who may otherwise be eligible for qualification/skills based pathway opportunities.[64] This was previously recognized as one of the recommendations proposed following the 2015 Andaman Sea crisis in the 6th Ministerial Conference of the Bali Process in 2016, in which "ministers reinforced the need to expand safe, legal and affordable migration pathways, including labour migration and family reunification programs, to provide an alternative to dangerous, irregular movement." These pathways would also help achieve the objectives of the route-based approach, which aims to support early interventions to provide alternatives to dangerous journeys.[65]

Section 3: Barriers to Intra-Regional Complementary Pathways

Preconditions for Intra-Regional Complementary Pathways

Before intra-regional complementary pathways can expand, several preconditions must be met.

First, eligible refugees need to be aware of the available complementary pathways and their corresponding eligibility requirements. One key informant noted that some promising candidates in Malaysia had missed education pathway opportunities because information was not shared sufficiently broadly or with enough advance notice to prepare applications.[66]

[57] Key Informant Interview, 2 March 2026
[58] Talent Beyond Boundaries, Hire-Train-Move Programmes for Displaced Talent, October 2024.
[59] Key Informant Interview, 6 March 2026.
[60] Journalists and Writers Foundation. Pioneers in SDGs 2025 - INNOVATION AWARD - Digital Refugee-Led Cooperative, Japan, October 2025.
[61] UNHCR. Operational Data Portal - Myanmar Situation, (accessed 6 March 2026).
[62] Ibid.
[63] Bali Process Regional Support Office and Mixed Migration Centre. Community Perceptions and Information Needs of Persons at Risk of Irregular Migration in Bali Process Member States: Evidence from Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, March 2025. pg.31
[64] Mohammed Siraj, The Andaman Sea Tragedy: Why Rohingya Youth Continue to Risk Death to Leave the Camps, 22 April 2026.
[65] UNHCR. Route-based approach to the mixed movements of refugees and migrants strategic overview, (accessed 6 March 2026).
[66] Key Informant Interview, 5 March 2026.

Other barriers to accessing information flagged by key informants included digital inclusion gaps and the lack of a comprehensive database of complementary pathway opportunities.[67] In addition to providing a repository of existing programs, a potential intra-regional database could also include features similar to the 'Talent Catalog' maintained by Talent Beyond Boundaries. The 'Talent Catalog' is an online searchable database that "captures in-depth information about refugees' skills, qualifications and work experience," and could facilitate intra-regional labor mobility by enabling employers to search for and recruit potential refugee candidates.[68]

Second, eligible refugees need to be able to meet up-front costs to access complementary pathways. Particularly in the case of qualification/skills-based pathways, refugees may face challenges in meeting application and administrative costs unless waivers are made available or included as part of cost-sharing arrangements within program design.

Third, refugees need to meet the specific pathway requirements to be considered eligible. This may include minimum language capacities, previous attendance and entry into a formal education institution, proof of income, or prior professional experience. Even if refugees meet these requirements, they may not possess or be able to certify diplomas, transcripts, or professional certifications. Support and engagement from government regulatory bodies (such as the Bangladesh Technical Education Board, the Office of the Vocational Education Commission in Thailand, and the Malaysian Qualifications Agency in Malaysia) can help address this issue by establishing mechanisms that enable refugees to obtain national skill competency certificates, supporting flexible approaches to recognize prior qualifications, and developing procedures as part of a 'Recognition of Prior Learning'[69] system to recognize non-formal and informal learning undertaken both in the refugees' country of origin and in their country of asylum.

Fourth, refugees need to be able to meet personal documentation requirements during the application process. A valid passport is often a minimum requirement for accessing complementary pathways, which many refugees lack. Some complementary pathways accept a UNHCR card as an alternative, but this can also be difficult for displaced populations to access. This is especially challenging for asylum seekers in Malaysia, where accumulated backlogs can result in UNHCR registration processing being delayed by years. In recognition of these delays, some higher education institutions in Malaysia have adopted a more flexible approach to documentation gaps, recognizing UNHCR-issued "Under Consideration" letters as an alternative for refugee applicants, but this is usually insufficient as proof of eligibility for complementary pathway programs abroad.[70]

Fifth, eligible refugees need to be able to secure appropriate travel documents and exit permits to travel on complementary pathways from the departure to the destination country. In most complementary pathway programs for which Myanmar refugees are eligible, the travel document is issued by the destination country. For example, the Philippines issues Machine-Readable Convention Travel Documents to students in the Philippines' Complementary Pathways program.[71] There are some cases in which travel documents and exit permits have been issued by the departure country, but these are usually processed on a case-by-case basis and depend on government-to-government agreements.[72] This case-by-case approach and reliance on travel documents issued by the destination country inhibit the ability to scale complementary pathway programs. This has also, in some cases, led to refugees being unable to access an education pathway even after being accepted and receiving a scholarship to study.[73] To overcome this barrier, host governments in the region could consider issuing travel documents to refugees. This could follow the precedent of Nepal, which issued travel documents to Tibetan and Bhutanese refugees despite not being a signatory to the 1951 convention.[74] Governments in the region could also consider adopting measures to allow refugees with government-issued identification documents (such as the forthcoming Dokumen Penaftaran Pelarian (DPP) card for refugees in Malaysia) to exit to pursue complementary pathway programs.[75]

[67] Key Informant Interview, 5 March 2026.
[68] UNHCR. A data-driven approach to refugees' labour mobility, (accessed 6 March 2026).
[69] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Recognition of prior learning: A practical guide for policy makers, 2023.
[70] Key Informant Interview, 5 March 2026.
[71] UNHCR Philippines. New batch of refugee scholars arrive in the Philippines through Complementary Pathways programme, July 2025.
[72] Key Informant Interview, 5 March 2026
[73] Key Informant Interview, 3 March 2026
[74] United States Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services. Nepal: Information on the Issuance of Refugee Travel Documents by the Nepalese Government, May 2001.
[75] For further discussion on alternative documents to facilitate refugees' travel see Migration Policy Institute. The Mobility Key: Realizing the Potential of Refugee Travel Documents, February 2024 pg. 6-8.

Challenges with Sustaining Intra-Regional Complementary Pathways

Once these preconditions are met, further challenges must be addressed to ensure that intra-regional complementary pathways can be sustained.

Several key informants emphasized the importance of taking measures to ensure the safety of refugees who access complementary pathways and called for the adoption of a protection-first approach. Even before pathways can be accessed, key informants emphasized that steps should be taken to establish safeguards so that personal information about refugees collected to facilitate access to complementary pathways is protected and not shared without refugees' informed consent to refugees' countries of origin.[76] During the implementation of complementary pathways, this approach would entail both the extension of minimum standards of treatment and the provision of targeted support to enable refugees to access rights, services, and justice. Key informants particularly noted the importance of robust safeguards for labor mobility pathways to mitigate the risk of exploitation by employers, on whom refugees are dependent to maintain their legal status.[77] To address these concerns, key informants suggested that pathway programs should integrate confidential feedback and accountability mechanisms and provide opportunities for refugees to meaningfully shape program design.

In addition to strengthening refugee safety, meaningful participation was flagged as an important element to ensure that pathway programs are responsive to their needs and aspiration of the refugees involved. One key informant, for instance, noted that in the case of the Philippines Complementary Pathways program, ongoing and regular engagement with Rohingya students during implementation was directly responsible for adaptations in the program's structure and ways of working that have strengthened Rohingya students' capacity to be self-reliant.[78]

Another important element of a protection-first approach concerns protection from refoulement and the refugee's legal status once they complete the employment contract or education program that facilitated their movement. Current intra-regional pathways for education and labor mobility in South and Southeast Asia are typically premised on the assumption of subsequent return to the country of origin. For refugees accessing these pathways, however, return would violate the principle of non-refoulement and expose refugees to persecution and serious harm. Hence, for refugees to safely access intra-regional pathways, it is essential that systems are established to ensure access to asylum and continued international protection after the pathway is completed, and for as long as the individual meets the international criteria of a refugee.

To sustain complementary pathway programs, political will is needed in both the departure and destination countries. Several key informants noted that governments in the region may be reluctant to establish new or even adapt intra-regional pathways because of concerns that such programs would act as a 'pull factor' for refugees.[79] Even when there is government buy-in, key informants flagged the risk of domestic backlash in both the departure and destination countries for skills-based education or labor pathways, as these could be negatively perceived as taking away opportunities from citizens. To mitigate these challenges, key informants suggested incorporating into the design of intra-regional complementary pathway programs increased investment to support programs in the host country, or including measures that ensure that pathways result in an overall net increase in economic opportunities for citizens of departure and destination countries.[80] This could follow the example of pledge commitments on skills development made at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum as part of the Multistakeholder Pledge for Rohingya Refugees, which committed to increase investments in education and skills training opportunities for both Rohingya refugees and citizens in regional host countries.[81]

[76] Key Informant Interview, 6 March 2026.
[77] Key Informant Interview, 4 March 2026.
[78] Key Informant Interview, 1 March 2026.
[79] Key Informant Interview, 5 March 2026.
[80] Key Informant Interview, 5 March 2026.
[81] UNHCR. Multistakeholder Pledge: Rohingya Refugees - Expanded Resilience, Enhanced, Solutions, (accessed 6 March 2026).

Even if scaled up, it is important to emphasize that not all refugees will be able to access complementary pathways. As refugees with heightened protection needs and vulnerabilities may not be eligible for complementary pathway programs, there is a risk that such programs may exacerbate or reinforce existing inequalities. While this can be mitigated to some extent through adaptations to program design to maintain equitable access to pathway opportunities, to ensure that refugees who are unable to meet pathway preconditions are not left behind, vulnerability-based pathways such as resettlement will continue to be needed.

Conclusion

Amidst the global reduction in resettlement and humanitarian funding, intra-regional complementary pathways offer a compelling approach for states in South and Southeast Asia to respond to the challenges of forced displacement. Existing education mobility programs such as the Philippines Complementary Pathways Program and the European Union Mobility Program in Myanmar already provide compelling proof-of-concepts demonstrating the feasibility and transformative potential of such pathways.

In addition to strengthening refugees' resilience and self-reliance, the expansion of intra-regional complementary pathways is aligned with regional connectivity initiatives on education and skills development, as well as regional efforts to reduce irregular migration. As a complement to recent initiatives to extend legal employment opportunities to refugees, intra-regional labor pathways could help maximize refugees' contribution to sustainable national and regional development.

To realize the full potential of intra-regional complementary pathways, coordinated interventions are needed to meet pathway preconditions. This should encompass measures to address existing information gaps and pathway costs, formally recognize and certify refugee skills and qualifications, overcome documentation gaps, and facilitate access to travel documents and exit permits.

Once established, a protection-first approach is needed to ensure that complementary pathways are supported with robust safeguards to prevent exploitation, facilitate access to rights, services, and justice, and mitigate the risk of refoulement. Pathway initiatives should also remain sensitive to the political context of host countries and incorporate linked measures and investment for citizens of departure and destination countries. With this strategic investment, intra-regional complementary pathways can evolve into scalable mechanisms that deliver sustained benefits to refugees and host communities across South and Southeast Asia.

Recommendations

For Refugee Hosting Member States in the region

- Support the expansion and establishment of intra-regional education pathway programs to enable qualified refugees to pursue higher education opportunities in South and Southeast Asia.
- Support the expansion and establishment of new technical and vocational education and training programs for refugees and host communities in the region to develop skills in economic sectors experiencing labor shortages or identified as priority areas of future growth.
- Create formal coordination mechanisms to support service provision and assistance for refugees accessing complementary pathways, modeled on the whole-of-government approach adopted in the Philippines Complementary Pathways program.
- Consider issuing refugees with machine-readable travel documents or adopting measures to enable refugees possessing government-issued identification documents (such as the DPP in Malaysia) to access intra-regional complementary pathways, facilitate access to exit permits and waive related fees.
- Establish mechanisms for government regulatory bodies to expand opportunities for refugees to obtain national skills competency certificates.
- Ensure protection safeguards are embedded across all complementary pathways, including guarantees of legal status, access to services, and clear grievance and redress mechanisms for refugees.
- Ensure protection from refoulement for refugees accessing complementary pathways and consider extending opportunities to refugees who complete their employment contract or education program pathways to long-term residency.

For Donors

- Support innovative financing mechanisms for intra-regional complementary pathway programs, such as pay-it-forward funding models, and examine their viability to be scaled.
- Waive upfront costs to access intra-regional complementary pathway programs, including application, language testing, admission, and visa fees.
- Ensure meaningful participation of refugees in the design, implementation, and monitoring of complementary pathway programs, including feedback and accountability mechanisms.

For Regional Institutions

- Integrate refugees into existing ASEAN regional high-skilled labor mobility initiatives, ensuring access to appropriate safeguards to protect refugees from refoulement during and after the employment opportunity.
- Develop regional 'recognition of prior learning' systems to support the recognition of non-formal and informal learning undertaken by refugees both in their country of origin and of asylum.

For UN Agencies and Civil Society

- Establish a regional information platform for Myanmar refugees identifying intra-regional complementary pathway opportunities, eligibility requirements, and timelines. This should be aligned with service mapping and pathway identification activities undertaken to support the operationalization of the Route-Based Approach along the South and Southeast Asia route.
- Establish a regional database of Myanmar refugees' skills, qualifications, and work experience which can be accessed by potential employers, building on the model of the 'Talent Catalog' maintained by Talent Beyond Boundaries, with the appropriate data protection measures.

About the Asia Displacement Solutions Platform

The Asia Displacement Solutions Platform (ADSP) is a joint initiative of the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), which aims to promote comprehensive solutions for displaced persons across the Afghan and Myanmar displacement situations. Drawing upon its members' operational presence throughout Asia, ADSP engages in evidence-based advocacy initiatives, capacity strengthening and convening activities to support improved outcomes for displacement-affected communities.

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