



Mixed
Migration
Centre

A Transit Country No More:

Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Indonesia

MMC Research Report, May 2021

Summary report



This summary report is informed by research commissioned by the Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) drawing from MMC's 4Mi survey data, a separate online survey devised and conducted especially for this study, as well as in-depth qualitative interviews with stakeholders, including refugees. For further details on the methodology and more in-depth findings please access the full research report [here](#).

Front cover photo credit:

Anadolu Agency / Getty Images.

Refugees in Jakarta wait to relocate by UNHCR.



**MINISTRY OF
FOREIGN AFFAIRS
OF DENMARK**
Danida

Indonesia – a transit country no more

Indonesia was once a transit country for thousands of refugees and asylum seekers en route to safety and a new life in third countries. Among those who arrived, most hoped to travel onwards irregularly by boat to Australia. However, since 2013, when Australian policies aimed at curbing irregular movements came into effect, many refugees and asylum seekers have found themselves immobilized and in situations of indefinite transit in Indonesia. With lengthy waiting times for resettlement and extremely limited places available, Indonesia has become an accidental and increasingly indefinite home. Although some refugees and asylum seekers are trying to make the most out of being in Indonesia, most feel trapped in uncertainty and struggle to move forward with their lives.

While the number of refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia is very small in comparison to the Indonesian population and other countries in the region, the challenges they face reveal the regional impacts of hard-line border management on mixed migration, as well as the need for more permanent solutions when return or resettlement are not possible. The challenges faced by this group also illuminate the devastating impacts of uncertainty and indefinite transit on the daily lives and wellbeing of people. This briefing paper examines the impact of involuntary immobility on refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia as well as the programming and policy changes needed to better support them.

Shifting regional policies leading to fewer movements, to and from, Indonesia

Indonesia currently hosts more than 13,000 refugees and asylum seekers from some 40 countries, with over half coming from Afghanistan, followed by smaller populations from Somalia, Iraq, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Yemen. Around a quarter of the total number of refugees and asylum seekers are children.¹ According to 4Mi data, the most common drivers of migration to Indonesia among Afghans are violence and insecurity (reported by 79% of 1,123 migrant survey respondents), a lack of rights (56%), and social services in their country of origin (21%).² Almost two thirds of respondents (65%) reported having used smugglers in order to get to Indonesia both via sea and air routes.

Between 1998 and mid-2013, 55,000 people transited through Indonesia to Australia by boat, their movements facilitated by smugglers through Indonesia's porous borders.³ However, since 2013, irregular maritime routes from Indonesia to Australia have all but closed as a result of Australia's offshore processing regime and hard-line approach. During this time and with financial support from Australia, the Indonesian government also stepped up its efforts to intercept maritime movements and detain refugees and asylum seekers en route to Australia.⁴ As a result, arrivals to Indonesia since 2013 have significantly dropped with numbers reaching the few hundreds only since 2019.⁵

Currently, irregular maritime movements to and from Indonesia mainly consist of Rohingya en route to Malaysia, escaping worsening conditions in the refugee camps of Cox's Bazar. In 2020, Rohingya made up two thirds of new arrivals to Indonesia, however of the 400 who arrived in 2020 by boat to Aceh, only around a quarter remain, with the majority presumed to have continued onwards to Malaysia, travelling irregularly by boat from northern Sumatra to Penang, aided by smugglers.⁶

1 UNHCR August 2020 update, unpublished.

2 The Mixed Migration Monitoring Initiative (4Mi), is a standardised quantitative and globalised survey, collecting primary data on mixed migration, including individual profiles, migratory drivers, means and conditions of movement, the smuggler economy, aspirations and destination choices. For more information see [here](#). For more information about the methodology of the research for this study, and the different surveys used, please see Annex 1 of the full report.

3 Australian government statistics, cited in Missbach, A. & Hoffstaedter, G. (2020) "[When Transit States Pursue Their Own Agenda: Malaysian and Indonesian Responses to Australia's Migration and Border Policies](#)," *Migration and Society: Advances in Research* 3.

4 Between 2013 and August 2018 1,764 people were intercepted at sea and returned to immigration detention in Indonesia according to Australian Federal Police figures. See Hirsh, A. (2018) "[After the boats have stopped](#)" Refugee Council of Australia; Missbach, A. (2015) "[Making a 'Career' in People-Smuggling in Indonesia: Protracted Transit, Restricted Mobility and the Lack of Legal Work Rights](#)," *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol 30, no 2.

5 UNHCR statistics, shared by email, March 2021.

6 Interview with UNHCR, by phone, February 2021; see also AFP (2021) "[Hundreds of Rohingya missing from Indonesian refugee camp](#)"

Temporary solutions inadequate for an increasingly permanent population

Southeast Asia has weak regional and national mechanisms to ensure protection and respond to people in mixed migration movements, including refugees and asylum seekers. However, in comparison to other countries in the region, Indonesia has been relatively progressive. In 2016, the government reaffirmed its commitment to providing asylum and clarified the status of refugees through a presidential decree.⁷ It has also moved away from widespread immigration detention and, although not signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, acknowledges the principle of non-refoulement in its own laws and administrative decrees.⁸

However, despite the increasingly permanent refugee population in Indonesia, the government assumes that asylum in Indonesia is temporary and that refugees will eventually move on to their final destination, even though their departure pathways are limited. As a result, the Indonesian government is reluctant to assume more responsibility for a population whose needs they believe should be met by the United Nations and wealthier nations in the region and beyond. According to an interviewed senior government official overseeing refugee management at the national level:

“We aren’t a rich country, but we help based on humanity. We support with shelter, housing, but the responsibility for meeting other needs is handled by UNHCR and other organizations that help.”⁹

The reality of increased permanency also does not match the aspirations of refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia

Departures for resettlement from Indonesia to third countries fell to the lowest level since 2012 last year and the reality is that very few will leave through this avenue. As further deterrence, Australia no longer resettles refugees who registered with the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, in Indonesia after July 2014, whereas previously it accepted more refugees from Indonesia for resettlement than any other country.¹⁰

However, despite their increasing permanency, the majority of refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia do not view Indonesia as their final destination. Indeed, 646 (57%) of the 4Mi survey respondents said they still hoped to reach Australia despite their increasingly indefinite transit in Indonesia.¹¹ Only a handful of those surveyed said Indonesia was their intended destination.¹² Across all surveys conducted as part of this research, Australia continued to be the most popular desired final destination, despite its increasing unlikelihood, followed by Canada.¹³

Externalisation – the impact of Australia on Indonesia’s management of refugees and asylum seekers

The relationship between Australia and Indonesia has been complex and intertwined, not least as Indonesia currently hosts thousands of refugees and asylum seekers precisely because of Australian efforts to restrict irregular movements to its borders. Previously, Indonesia accepted technical support and funding from Australia to enhance policing of its borders,¹⁴ and for the past two decades, Australian support for the management of refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia has been channelled through a regional cooperation arrangement.¹⁵ This funding agreement previously financed the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to operate

7 [Regulation of the President of the Republic of Indonesia Number 125 Year 2016 Concerning the Handling of Foreign Refugees](#)

8 See for example immigration directive IMI-1489.UM.08.05 from 2010 on the handling of illegal immigrants.

9 Interview with Indonesian government official, Jakarta, December 2020.

10 Since 2018 Australia has resettled fewer than 100 refugees from Indonesia each year. For statistics on refugee resettlement, see [UNHCR’s portal](#).

11 More than 50% using data from the 4Mi core migrant survey.

12 Eight refugees out of all surveyed across the 4Mi core migrant survey, 4Mi COVID-19 surveys and the online survey.

13 This question was asked in the 4Mi core migrant survey, two 4Mi COVID-19 surveys and the online survey.

14 See Missbach and Hoffstaedter, op. cit.; and Kneebone, S. (2017) [“Australia as a Powerbroker on Refugee Protection in Southeast Asia,”](#) *Refugee* vol 33, no 1.

15 For information on the level of funding, see: Hirsch, A. & Doig, C. (2019) [“Australia’s other ‘offshore policy’ – containing refugees in Indonesia through the International Organisation for Migration”](#) University of Melbourne blogpost.

detention centres, as well as to provide mental health support, education and other essential needs to those detained. Eventually the centres became over-crowded due in part to destitute refugees and asylum seekers self-reporting; despite pressure, Indonesia was not open to building more.¹⁶ This led to a shift away from detention as a standard migration management policy towards the widespread use of IOM-run community shelters to house the majority of refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia.¹⁷

Two distinct cohorts, both facing separate challenges

Australia's regional cooperation agreement has created two distinct cohorts of refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia. On one side the majority of refugees and asylum seekers, 7,700 in total, are supported by IOM living in shelters, primarily outside Jakarta, and receiving monthly stipends. Approximately 70% of refugees under IOM's care have been in Indonesia for five years or more and entered the IOM-managed community shelters after their release from immigration detention or referral by the Indonesian government.¹⁸ Since March 2018, when Australia announced changes to its funding in order to discourage refugees and asylum seekers from trying to reach its shores, new arrivals no longer qualified for this support. In contrast to those receiving support from IOM, 6,000 refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia live independently within local communities, mainly centred in and around Jakarta and West Java, with only the most vulnerable accessing financial support from UNHCR.¹⁹

Indonesia's 2016 presidential decree delegates responsibility for managing refugees to local governments, but offers no budgetary support to do so. Local government implementation is patchy, and the central government's directives are not always followed. Immigration monitoring of refugees and asylum seekers also varies across places and over time, from hands-off to more restrictive and punitive approaches.²⁰ For example, in some regions, local authorities have imposed curfews

and restrictions on the movements of refugees, including prohibitions on riding motorbikes, resulting in refugees feeling unable to move freely.²¹ One refugee advocate interviewed remarked that some immigration detention centres in fact had granted comparatively more freedom of movement to refugees.²²

The difference in support received by refugees and by asylum seekers in Indonesia has created inequalities and tensions between the two groups. An online survey conducted as part of this research showed that many respondents were not happy with their accommodation. Interviewees living in the shelters reported tensions arising from living in a shared space, and complained of noise and a lack of privacy. Some of those who were living independently in the community in privately rented accommodation also said they would prefer to be in the shelters.²³ However, despite many refugees' dissatisfaction with the shelter system, living independently in the community, without access to support or the legal right to work, often leads to situations of extreme destitution and poverty. Many refugees who were unable to get by on their own reported themselves to immigration officials asking to be re-detained in order to access IOM support and enter the shelter system. Some 4,000 individuals did so between 2014 and 2017.²⁴

The urgent need for legal work rights to support sustainable livelihoods

Regardless of the support refugees and asylum seekers receive in Indonesia, resources are scarce, choices are limited and systemic destitution is rife with thousands scraping by on shrinking savings, help from friends and family, and whatever informal work they can find.

-
- 16 Human Rights Watch (2013) "[Barely Surviving: Detention, Abuse and Neglect of Migrant Children in Indonesia](#)". On the policy shifts, see Missbach, A. (2017) "[Accommodating Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Indonesia: From Immigration Detention to Containment in 'Alternatives to Detention'](#)," *Refugee* vol 33, no 2.
- 17 In March 2018, Australia announced reductions in funding for refugees in Indonesian detention centres; by the end of the year, those still detained had been released to IOM-run community shelters. See Hirsh, A. (2018) "[After the boats have stopped](#)," Refugee Council of Australia.
- 18 IOM Refugee and Asylum Seeker Statistics, November 2020, unpublished.
- 19 1,000 refugees receive a monthly stipend from UNHCR, and roughly 150 receive a monthly stipend via Jesuit Refugee Service Indonesia. Access to support is assessed on a needs basis. UNHCR significantly expanded its support to all independently living refugees during the pandemic; it is continuing to provide this support through 2021 depending on available funding.
- 20 For more information please see the full report here
- 21 One refugee living in a shelter even reported having to pay a bribe to the security guard to leave the compound. While security guards are not immigration or IOM employees, that such practices exist points to the vulnerability of refugees. Interview with refugee, Medan, December 2020.
- 22 Interview with refugee advocate, by phone, December 2020. See also Missbach (2017) [op.cit.](#)
- 23 The online survey also showed that 64% of respondents (n=61) living in an IOM shelter said they would prefer independent accommodation. However, there were also some refugees living independently – 29% (n=154) – who stated they would prefer to be in an IOM-supported community shelter. Although these statistics are not representative of the overall population of refugees and asylum seekers, they indicate that some refugees and asylum seekers struggle with the accommodation they currently have.
- 24 UNHCR statistics cited in Missbach, A. (2018) "[Falling through the cracks: The impacts of Australia's funding cuts on refugees in Indonesia](#)," Policy Forum.

The overwhelming challenge for refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia is their lack of formal work rights, without which they cannot access sustainable livelihoods. Working irregularly in Indonesia is uncommon among refugees and asylum seekers, as there is a risk of exploitation and crackdowns by immigration authorities. There are examples of refugees being underpaid or not being paid at all for their labour.²⁵ One Rohingya refugee in Makassar who does manual labour described the difficulties in negotiating a fair rate for his work:

"I say to Indonesians, if there is work, ask me. I need to eat. Before, they would refuse because I don't have permission [to work]. I say to them, I only get IDR 500,000 [~USD 35] from the UN each month, it's not enough for three people to eat. I don't always get work, three or four times a week. As long as they'll give me IDR 50,000 [USD3.50 per day], I'll take the work."²⁶

The Indonesian government views the right to work as something which could potentially encourage refugees and asylum seekers to stay longer in Indonesia and lead to competition with Indonesian job-seekers.²⁷ However, there is little evidence from research to show that granting more rights in Indonesia would alter refugees' long-term intentions.²⁸ Further, beyond providing a means to combat widespread and systemic destitution, work and training opportunities may also support refugees to pursue 'complementary pathways' such as educational and labour mobility schemes, which although not traditional solutions for refugees, are increasingly becoming more viable options than resettlement.

Indonesia provides some access to services, although barriers persist

Despite the many challenges facing refugees and asylum seekers, Indonesia is at least a place of relative safety and access to services, including education and healthcare. Access to education for refugee and asylum-seeking children has improved following a 2019 circular issued by the education ministry stipulating their entitlement to enrol in local schools. However, there is considerable variation in its implementation across Indonesia, with some local governments still refusing to grant access.²⁹ Therefore, despite the improvements, many such children are still not in school, compounding the stress faced by families and worries for the future. A refugee with two children living in Medan described her worries about the future of her children:

"The children aren't in school. My son studies on his own using the internet. My daughter has difficulty studying. And I'm not able to teach them."³⁰

In order to address some of these issues, refugees have started their own learning centres in Jakarta and West Java, providing education for children as well as adults. The centres are independent of UNHCR and IOM and fundraise on their own.³¹ These initiatives provide an important sense of community to refugees, while providing an alternative to Indonesian schooling. Because these learning centres generally use English, some parents also appear to prefer them over Indonesian schools, believing English will be more useful for resettlement.³²

Access to healthcare is generally better than access to education for refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia. Even though foreigners' right to healthcare is not guaranteed under Indonesian law, organisations supporting refugees and asylum seekers report they are generally not refused treatment at community health centres or at government hospitals.³³ However, barriers to accessing health services persist, primarily in terms of cost as well as language barriers, despite support

25 Interview with UNHCR, by phone, February 2021.

26 Interview with refugee, Makassar, December 2020.

27 Interviews with national task force, Jakarta, December 2020; with UNHCR and IOM, November 2020 and February 2021; refugee advocate, by phone, December 2020. See also Adiputera, Y. & Prabandari, A. (2018) "[Addressing challenges and identifying opportunities for refugee access to employment in Indonesia](#)," Yogyakarta: Institute of International Studies.

28 When online survey respondents were asked whether having work rights would induce them to stay in Indonesia, more than 60 percent said no – only refugees in Jakarta were more likely to opt for staying.

29 See full report for more details.

30 Interview with refugee, Medan, December 2020.

31 Some activities receive institutional donor support, but these are refugee-run initiatives primarily.

32 Thomas Brown, "Refugee-led education in Indonesia," *Forced Migration Review* 58 (June 2018).

33 Interviews with UNHCR and CWS, by phone, November 2020. When asked what kinds of health services they can access, survey respondents were most like to say community health centres followed by government hospital.

available from IOM and UNHCR to access medical care.³⁴ 4Mi data collected during the second half of 2020 among Afghan refugees in Jakarta and West Java shows that 31% of 456 survey respondents reported they did not have access to healthcare, with 81% reporting that they did not have money to access healthcare.³⁵ Many refugees who were interviewed said they do not seek medical care when ill, as they fear the fees and the cost of medicine. As one female refugee from Iran explained:

"We have ... high costs without jobs and income is very difficult, we prefer not to go to the doctor."³⁶

During the COVID-19 pandemic, refugees have had access to government quarantine facilities.³⁷ Discussions between the UN and the Indonesian government are ongoing about vaccinating refugees against COVID-19.³⁸

The impact of uncertainty on mental health

The pressures of involuntary immobility have taken a toll on the mental health of refugees and asylum seekers. While many require counselling for experiences that occurred prior to their arrival in Indonesia, in their countries of origin or en route, situations of mental ill-health have been exacerbated, or created, as a result of prolonged uncertainty, a lack of support and isolation in Indonesia. More than 70% (n=271) of the online survey respondents reported feeling very worried on a daily basis. During COVID-19, 71% of those surveyed by 4Mi in Indonesia in the second half of 2020 (n=456) reported that they were increasingly worried and stressed.

While referrals to mental health services have increased in recent years, many refugees are reluctant to seek help. Furthermore, wait times to see a counsellor at one of UNHCR's service providers are long, with one refugee saying she waited two years before being able to access help.³⁹ One elderly Rohingya woman interviewed said she often cries uncontrollably and neither she nor her daughter receives financial support, leaving both of them dependent on her son-in-law, who only receives IDR 500,000 (~35 USD) a month from IOM and works illegally to support the family:

"I can only pray to God...life is difficult. I want to die so that I won't be a burden for my daughter."⁴⁰

Her son-in-law feels a similar level of despair, frustrated by the long wait for resettlement and the constant struggle to earn money:

"Their answer is always: "wait, wait." It continues like this. I want to kill myself but if I commit suicide, who will protect my wife and my mother-in-law? We're waiting until after COVID, until Australia opens again."⁴¹

Some refugees and asylum seekers find their lives in Indonesia so unbearable and their prospects there so bleak that they have taken their own lives: two in the first three months of 2021, four in 2020, and two in 2019.⁴² During the period this research was conducted (August 2020 – April 2021), refugees and asylum seekers mentioned at least two recent suicide attempts to researchers. In December, following the suicide of two male Afghan refugees in the Jakarta area, refugees and asylum seekers held a vigil in front of UNHCR's office.⁴³ This highlights the urgent need for increased mental health support for refugees and asylum seekers alongside investment in durable solutions.

34 Asia-Pacific Refugee Rights Network, "Indonesia: Lack of access to healthcare for refugees and barriers to legal aid," June 2020, available at <https://aprrn.org/indonesia-lack-of-access-to-healthcare-for-refugees-and-barriers-to-providing-legal-aid/>. See full report for more details.

35 As this data was collected during the pandemic, it likely reflects access at that moment in time.

36 Response to online survey conducted as part of this research

37 Interview with CWS, by phone, November 2020.

38 Interview with UNHCR, by phone, February 2021.

39 Interview with refugee, Jakarta, by phone, January 2021.

40 Interview with refugee, Makassar, December 2020.

41 Interview with refugee, Makassar, December 2020.

42 Interview with UNHCR, by phone, February 2021.

43 Joniad, JN. (2021) "[Indefinite limbo drives refugees to take their own lives in Indonesia](#)," Overland.

Durable solutions, complementary pathways and integration support

With the closure of irregular maritime routes to Australia and the prospect of resettlement increasingly unlikely, refugees are caught in situations of involuntary immobility in Indonesia. However, despite their increasing permanency, the Indonesian government, as well as refugees themselves, continue to view Indonesia as a temporary transit location. As a result, there is an ongoing lack of integration support, barriers to accessing services and reluctance from the Indonesian government to provide formal work rights. For refugees living under a cloud of uncertainty about their future, without adequate protections and weathering situations of systemic destitution, a mental health crisis is building.⁴⁴

Solutions thus fall into two categories – those that would improve the lives of refugees while they are in Indonesia, and those that would facilitate their eventual departure, including resettlement or complementary pathways which would allow refugees to leave Indonesia through legal routes while also ensuring their protection needs are met. While policy changes in Indonesia seem unlikely to provide long-term solutions that meet the desire of refugees to be resettled in third countries, they will improve the services, opportunities and coping mechanisms available to refugees while they wait.

44 Prolonged uncertainty and financial insecurity resulting from protracted transit are clearly contributing to worsening outcomes for refugees in Indonesia and the rash of suicides and attempts in 2020 suggest a mounting mental health crisis which needs to be urgently addressed. Interview with refugee-run organization, by phone, Jakarta, January 2021. See also Timmerman, A. (2021) "[In Indonesia, desperation grows for refugees trapped in limbo for years](#)" The New Humanitarian

Recommendations:

To the Government of Indonesia:

- Continue to provide asylum and uphold the principle of non-refoulement for refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia, while expanding protection of their other rights in Indonesian policy and law.
- Implement fully the 2016 presidential decree and ensure local governments permit access to services and have allocated budgets to use for the management of refugees and asylum seekers in their area.
- Consider ending immigration detention not only in practice but also in policy and law.
- Ensure national and local refugee task forces include active participation of all relevant line ministries, such as those responsible for education, health, social affairs and manpower, to provide a holistic response to refugee needs.
- Expand livelihood opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers – including but not limited to vocational training – to enable them to contribute to the local economy, to protect them from exploitation and to lessen dependence on funders.
- Draw on Indonesia's experience managing labour migration to support and prepare refugees and asylum seekers for labour mobility schemes – as one potential complementary pathway that would enable departure to a third country.
- Ensure adequate funding for regional and local responses to new arrivals, particularly Rohingya arriving by boat.

TO UNHCR, IOM and other organizations supporting refugees and asylum seekers in Indonesia:

- Ensure assistance to refugees and asylum seekers responds to their expressed needs and facilitates expansion of refugee-run initiatives, especially in areas outside Jakarta and West Java.
- Advocate for the end of arbitrary rules imposed by local governments that limit the freedoms of refugees and asylum seekers.
- In partnership with local governments, support housing arrangements that would maximize the well-being of refugees and asylum seekers and foster positive interactions with host communities.
- Support greater integration, including by increasing opportunities to learn Bahasa Indonesia and ensuring women can participate in classes.
- Continue advocacy such that children can enrol in Indonesian schools as per the education ministry's directive.
- Address barriers, including those related to language and cost, that deter refugees and asylum seekers from seeking healthcare.
- Expand mental health programming to support refugees and asylum seekers, including by strengthening the role of refugee-run centres in ensuring that individuals who need counselling can access support.
- Link vocational training to income-generating opportunities where possible, in partnership with the Indonesian government.
- Ensure that all support provided to refugees and asylum seekers is gender-sensitive and addresses additional barriers faced by women so as to support their empowerment.



The MMC is a global network consisting of six regional hubs and a central unit in Geneva engaged in data collection, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration. The MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise on mixed migration. The MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. The MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

The MMC is part of and governed by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). Global and regional MMC teams are based in Copenhagen, Dakar, Geneva, Nairobi, Tunis, Bogota and Bangkok.

For more information visit:
mixedmigration.org and follow us at @Mixed_Migration

