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Research Article

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and education for Rohingya refugees in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and education for Rohingya refugees in Malaysia are examined in this paper. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serve as a blueprint for achieving a better and more sustainable future for all. Its fourth goal is to improve educational quality and enable socioeconomic mobility to help people escape poverty. The problem for Rohingya refugees in Malaysia is that they are not officially recognized by the host government. This study has been conducted using a qualitative approach. Purposive sampling has been chosen to identify respondents like United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) personnel, Rohingya refugees, and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A semi-structured interview question was used to collect the information from the respondents. As a result, one of the consequences is that their children are not permitted to attend government-run schools for formal education. This situation has left them dissatisfied and concerned about their future in Malaysia. Nonetheless, in order to leverage the SDGs' goal and achieve its motto of "leaving no one behind", the UNHCR, as an international UN body, made an effort to provide access to the education sector. These efforts aim not only to improve educational quality, but also to strengthen ties between the refugee community and the host society. The local NGOs also collaborate with UNHCR in terms of financial support to further their secondary and even tertiary study. Despite those challenges, it still strives to achieve the SDG No. 4 target to reach the quality of education for Rohingya refugees. As a result, efforts to improve education for Rohingyas in Malaysia are ongoing, and all stakeholders must work together to make it a reality.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Rohingya refugees; UNHCR; education; Malaysia

1. Introduction

As one of the United Nations (UN) bodies, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has played a vital role since 1950, during the Second World War, to provide humanitarian assistance and temporary shelter for those people who have been affected by war. UNHCR defines a refugee as an individual or group who has had to leave his/her country of origin[1]. This definition involves a situation of poverty and hardship, the impact of human rights violations, conflict with the government, and civil war within the country. The UNHCR only recognizes those who have fled these hardships with eligible refugee status by giving them protection but not immigrants of a purely economic nature. This can be seen based on its definition through Article 1 of the 1951 Refugees Convention and 1967 Protocol defines a refugee as follows[2]:

A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

The refugee problem is one unresolved issue nowadays globally. The recent data based on the office of UNHCR shows about 79.5 million people in many places in the world have been forced to flee their place of origin[3]. There are factors that influenced people are being forced to leave their home such as natural disaster and war. However, factors like government persecution and human right violations that happened internally seem to dominate the main causes for the people to become refugees.

To enhance the capability of UNHCR as an international body which focus on the refugee's problem, this body has officially to be part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development[4]. The 2030 Agenda which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2015 has identified the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that need to be achieved for all people around the world. Thus, the SDG cannot be achieved as good as it is if it does not include the rights and needs of refugees, internally displaced and stateless people.

The major concern that is stressed by the 2030 Agenda is about leaving no one behind and ensuring all people regardless of their background to enjoy the rights and inclusiveness. Hence, the reason why the declaration of the 2030 Agenda has included the matters related to refugees is as stated below[5]:

Paragraph 4 pledges, "*that no one will be left behind and that Goals and targets will be met for all nations and peoples and all segments of society.*"

Paragraph 23 states that, "*Those whose needs are reflected in the agenda include all children, youth, persons with disabilities (of whom more than 80% live in poverty), people living with HIV/AIDS, older persons, indigenous peoples, refugees and internally displaced persons and migrants. We resolve to take further effective measures and actions, in conformity with international law, to remove obstacles and constraints, strengthen support and meet the special needs of people living in areas affected by complex humanitarian emergencies and in areas affected by terrorism.*"

It is critical to identify the refugees' groups that temporarily settle in the hosting country by reflecting the 2030 Agenda, whether to ensure they are associated with SDGs or not[6]. This situation can be seen by concentrating on the Rohingya. It is because the Rohingyas are one of the ethnic groups that have recently contributed to the global refugee crisis. The Rohingya are Muslims from Myanmar (Burma). They are forced to flee across the border of their home country due to government persecution and abuse from local Buddhists. Because of their desperate situation, the Rohingyas have no choice but to flee. Many Rohingyas are currently seeking refuge in a temporary camp near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border. Nonetheless, some of them are fleeing to other countries in search of a better future and the protection of the host country. According to Wahab and Khairi[7], Malaysia is one of the preferred Southeast Asian destinations for Rohingyas.

2. Literature review

Registration cards are required for Rohingya refugees because UNHCR is the only organization working for Persons of Concern (POC) in Malaysia[8]. As a result, the active role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in assisting them with UNHCR registration provides the government with the most up-to-date data on the refugee situation in Malaysia. Although having a UNHCR card allows the Rohingya better access to basic human rights such as medical care, it does not represent the government's acceptance of the refugee law[9].

Refugee community organizations, on the other hand, aid in the support of refugees and serve as organizers. They can provide information and orientation, as well as help many refugees feel less isolated.

The best strategy would be to use traditional and widely used methods of information dissemination. Rohingya NGOs can assist UNHCR in providing beneficiaries with information-based geographic displacement information capable of completing spatial descriptions as needed in promoting international human rights by developing and disseminating computerized refugee registration methods[10]. This can be accomplished by giving them the impression that refugees and refugee claimants can be well-handled within the system and that no free person should be left outside the system. As a result, UNHCR and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should provide registered refugees with information, housing, food assistance, education, water, sanitation, health, and nutritional support.

Contrarily, the inability to present documentation leads to a variety of psychological and practical issues, particularly for refugees and other displaced individuals in their communities who serve as the main carers. Registration is necessary to receive assistance in many situations, in addition to determining legal status, age, and citizenship[11]. The overarching idea is to draw attention to the requirement that the government provide Rohingya refugees with all the paperwork they require in order to exercise their rights and protections, including passports, identity cards, birth certificates, and marriage licenses. In addition, the proof of an identifiable individual or family must be filled out to continue the registration of refugees.

There is no systematic method for gathering experience that can be used to provide new approach changes and instruments that can be used for changing situations, which is why this pragmatic field control has only recently become apparent[12]. The techniques described can be used or modified as conditions change and more information about the castaway population is needed. The situation might be connected to the refugees' educational background. Since the Rohingya are not permitted to enroll in the formal education system in their country of origin, the alternative education model offered by the NGO will aid in raising literacy levels among this population, particularly the younger generation[13]. This is one of the reasons why the majority of them lack intelligence and skill. Education is also recognized as an ongoing, active, and complex process that happens in a person's life because of various experiences, whether formally or informally, and in which knowledge and information gained through the learning process are crucial to success in the future.

Education has many positive aspects, such as a good career, social status, and self-confidence. As a result, the right to education, or education itself, plays an important role in the development of individual potential as well as a country's success in terms of economic development, social justice, spiritual strength, moral and ethical standards. Because Rohingya refugees are not permitted to attend formal schools, some limited education is provided through an informal parallel system of over 133 community-based learning centers[14]. NGOs, charities, and refugee communities run these centers, which rely on donations and international aid.

UNHCR Malaysia has now established an education unit and collaborates with local NGOs. They also work together to organize initiatives like teacher training and teacher compensation. This effort aims to increase the number of Rohingya children enrolled in alternative education provided by NGOs[15]. However, these learning centers lack the amenities that regular schools provide, such as classrooms, libraries, and laboratories. As a result, UNHCR's current education initiatives should be strengthened in terms of funding, infrastructure, and human resources. It is critical that the government intervene in this matter through the Ministry of Education (MoE)[16]. The MoE's advice and assistance will strengthen education initiatives by maintaining the quality of the curriculum taught in NGOs' schools. Even though the Rohingya are temporarily seeking refuge in the country, it must be reviewed and revised on a regular basis to ensure that it is in line with the goals of the country's education policy.

3. Methodology/materials

This study was carried out utilizing qualitative methodology. Using a purposeful sample, 50 respondents, including UNHCR staff, Rohingya refugees, and local NGOs, have been identified. However, the Rohingya refugees who live in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor are the main population emphasis. According to the research design, the study's time period will run from January 2022 to December 2022. There were various restrictions and limits throughout the fieldwork study that had an impact on the research, notably those that were specific to investigating Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. This includes difficulties with communication due to language hurdles, cultural sensitivity, and difficulty reaching certain refugee populations. The respondents are questioned using a semi-structured interview question to gather information.

The questionnaire was given out by interviewers in the study that specifically focused on Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. This strategy was adopted to make sure that respondents could fully and accurately express their experiences and viewpoints, regardless of their level of literacy or survey instrument knowledge. Given the probable language challenges and cultural sensitivities within the Rohingya community, interviewer-administered questions allowed for more nuanced discussions and clarifications. This strategy aims to promote a deeper comprehension of the participants' perspectives and to compile thorough data for the study. The provided data and information have undergone content analysis.

4. Results and findings

The assessment of the results and findings section reveals a need for greater comprehensiveness in the presentation of obtained insights from the Rohingya refugees in Malaysia, who were integral respondents in this study. To address this, the forthcoming revisions will prioritize a more explicit exposition of the identified findings and the rich information garnered from this resilient community. Based on the data from UNHCR Malaysia, there are about 185,920 refugees and asylum-seekers registered by this body as end of August 2022[17]. From the total number, the majority refugees are from within Southeast Asia region, in particular Myanmar. It consists by Rohingyas (105,710), Chins (23,430) and other ethnic groups (30,050) which came from conflict-affected areas and fleeing persecution in Myanmar. On other hand, Malaysia also received the refugees outside the Southeast Asia region with the total numbers of 26,720 from 50 countries. For example, refugees from Pakistan (6840), Yemenis (3830), Syria (3400), Somalia (3220), Afghanistan (3270), Sri Lanka (1570), Iraq (1200), and Palestine (780). In terms of gender distribution, about 66% are men and 34% are women. In addition, there are some 48,200 children under the age of 18.

Malaysia is one of the destination countries for refugees especially Rohingyas. Some of the Rohingya refugees enter Malaysia on the early days just before Malaysia gain its independence in 1957[18]. However, the groups of Rohingyas seek refuge to Malaysia in early 1990s due to the Myanmar government policy that did not recognize them. Although some of the Rohingya refugees made to reach to Malaysia and start a new life here, the problem for them is more of the same. Despite the Rohingya refugees are not violated physically in Malaysia, their daily life is in uncertainty due to the Malaysian government policy that not officially recognized the refugee status.

Central to the discussion are two overarching themes that have emerged prominently from the data which are education and sustainability. The analysis has illuminated the vital role of education as a transformative pathway for the Rohingya refugees in Malaysia. Through their feedback, we discern a resounding call for interventions that ensure equitable and accessible education, thereby empowering this marginalized population with knowledge and skills vital for their socio-economic progress. Furthermore, the theme of sustainability

emerges as a thread woven into the fabric of their aspirations, urging for holistic strategies that foster self-reliance and integration, while preserving their cultural identity.

Education is an important matter for refugees in Malaysia. This is because education can be used as a preparation material for the refugee group before they could go to a third country or return to their country of origin[19]. Refugees often drop out of acquiring knowledge due to their precarious daily living conditions. Furthermore, the Malaysian government's policy of not allowing refugees to attend government schools prevents them from attending formal education. Aware of this problem, UNHCR also focuses on education issues for refugees, especially children and teenagers.

As a result, UNHCR initiates the establishment of a school for refugees to provide basic education such as Malay and English language, mathematics, and science. However, because refugees are dispersed throughout the country, UNHCR has limited capacity to organize school for them[20]. As a result, some civil society organizations in Malaysia, including NGOs, have taken on the responsibility of providing basic education to Rohingya children and other refugees. This effort is consistent with the SDGs, particularly the fourth target, Education.

Prior to now, the idea of sustainable development was centered on local, national, and international development, economic, and environmental issues. This idea, however, can be applied to a different topic that addresses the significance of intergenerational equity. So, according to the United Nations, sustainable development is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"[21]. The ability to continue the good work left behind for future generations is the central concern of sustainable development.

The United Nations, through one of its agencies, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), took the initiative to introduce the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 to improve the concept of sustainable development throughout the world[22]. A wide range of social and economic development issues are covered by the SDGs. The primary goal of the SDGs is to transform the world based on sustainable development principles towards a variety of issues, including climate change, health, gender equality, social justice, education, hunger, and poverty[23]. The SDGs include 17 goals that must be met in order to end poverty, protect the environment, and ensure that all people live in peace and prosperity. The fourth goal of the SDGs is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote opportunities for lifelong learning for all.

SDG No. 4 [24] lists seven main targets that put an emphasis on literacy and learning throughout the entire educational cycle, from pre-kindergarten to higher education. The list of targets is as follows:

1) By 2030, ensure that all boys and girls complete primary and secondary education that is free, equitable, and produces effective learning outcomes for Goal-4.

2) By 2030, guarantee that all boys and girls have access to high-quality pre-primary education, so they are prepared for primary education.

3) By 2030, guarantee that all men and women have equal access to technical, vocational, and tertiary education that is both affordable and of high quality, including university.

4) By 2030, increase the number of youth and adults with relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship.

5) By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the most vulnerable, including people with disabilities, indigenous peoples, and vulnerable children.

6) By 2030, ensure that all youth and a significant proportion of adults, both men and women, are literacy and numeracy proficient.

7) By 2030, ensure that all learners have the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development, such as through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and culture's contribution to sustainable development.

Those targets are planned specifically to address the critical issue in terms of refugees' education. These targets also have been promoted by the former commissioner of UNHCR, António Guterres to ensure the sustainability of refugee education around the world[25]:

"We have a collective responsibility to ensure education plans consider the needs of some the most vulnerable children and youth in the world—refugees, internally displaced children, stateless children and children whose right to education has been compromised by war and insecurity. These children are the keys to a secure and sustainable future, and their education matters for us all."

However, there are some difficulties that UNHCR and its partners must overcome, such as aiding with those child refugees who are denied access to formal public education in Malaysia, lack of certification, and inability to take public examinations. Concerns about educators include low pay and a high teacher turnover rate[26]. Additionally, both teachers and students deal with security and safety issues both inside and outside of the classroom. Lack of data on out of school children become one of the challenges to be identified. Based on the targets made by the SDG No. 4, it shows that there are challenges to face by Rohingyas refugee in Malaysia. Although the targets cover all the aspect in terms of quality and sustainability which are needed by human beings to achieve the good education but, it is quite difficult to fully implement in Malaysia. Bear in mind, Malaysia is not obliged and responsible to provide free education to refugees because the government hopes that they will be repatriated or resettled out of Malaysia as soon as possible. However, the reality is that they will be here for many years to come.

In pursuit of safeguarding and advancing the fundamental right to education for the Rohingya refugee population in Malaysia, a strategic emphasis on comprehensive insights is imperative. This endeavor necessitates a dedicated examination of pertinent international reports, notably exemplified by the comprehensive studies conducted by UNHCR. The UNHCR reports offer a substantial repository of data and analysis, particularly concerning the enrollment levels of Rohingya refugees within the educational landscape of Malaysia. By scrutinizing these reports, we can discern intricate patterns and multifaceted challenges that impact educational accessibility and quality for this marginalized community. Noteworthy among these challenges are systemic issues encompassing economic constraints, the dearth of sufficient support from international benefactors aimed at education, and the underutilization of the expertise and potential embodied by Rohingya educators.

The economic barriers faced by Rohingya refugees frequently obstruct their pursuit of education, relegating them to the periphery of educational opportunities. This impediment is compounded by a shortfall in international contributions earmarked for education, resulting in a suboptimal infrastructure for learning. Additionally, the untapped reservoir of knowledge held by Rohingya teachers remains a latent resource, often sidelined due to systemic inefficiencies. By delving into the intricate web of challenges outlined in these international reports, it can glean invaluable insights into the multifaceted dimensions of the Rohingya refugee education landscape in Malaysia. This knowledge serves as a foundational basis for the formulation of pragmatic policies and interventions geared towards dismantling these barriers and fostering an environment that truly upholds the right to education for all Rohingya refugees. Incorporating the findings and recommendations from UNHCR reports enables us to navigate the complexities of education policies more adeptly and act in a manner that holistically addresses the obstacles encountered by Rohingya students and

educators alike. Thus, the fusion of international insights, coupled with localized efforts, is instrumental in achieving meaningful progress toward ensuring equitable access to education and catalyzing positive transformations within the Rohingya community in Malaysia.

Embedded within the findings are invaluable lessons that warrant a dedicated exploration. The voices of the Rohingya refugees underscore the imperative of tailoring education initiatives to address their unique challenges and aspirations. The feedback offers profound insights into the need to forge an education path that harmonizes with their circumstances, culture, and future prospects. Additionally, the call to enhance technical skills resonates strongly, indicating a desire to cultivate practical competencies that can empower them to contribute meaningfully to their communities and beyond. These findings bear significant practical implications that extend beyond the confines of academic discourse. The journey from insight to impact is palpable in the context of the Rohingya refugee community. As such, the gleaned lessons can be transmuted into actionable strategies on the real ground basis. To this end, it is imperative to collaboratively design educational frameworks that are culturally sensitive, inclusive, and tailored to the Rohingya's unique needs. Concurrently, an emphasis on technical skill development can be realized through targeted training programs that harness and amplify their inherent talents. By imbuing these insights with a profound understanding of lessons learned, we endeavor to pave a pragmatic path forward, one that reimagines education, hones technical skills, and actualizes sustainable integration for the Rohingya refugees in Malaysia.

5. Conclusion

The education's situation of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia is quite complex due to their status in Malaysia which is not recognized by the Malaysian government. However, the government still considers themselves as a temporary host for these refugees and hopes for them to be repatriated or resettled as soon as possible. So, refugees in Malaysia will not be detained inside camp and they are allowed to move freely within this country. The government is also not responsible for supporting the refugees by providing temporary shelter and food. Hence, refugees need to be independent to continue their daily life.

Since the government does not take care of the education of refugees, UNHCR strives to provide an alternative solution to assist them in accessing basic knowledge. Nevertheless, due to the insufficient manpower and resources, UNHCR seeks the collaboration with local NGOs in Malaysia to open the alternative learning center in refugee settlement within the Malaysia's peninsular. This is because refugees are not only staying around Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, but also in other places due to the economic opportunity and life survival.

For example, the establishment of alternative learning center is to cover the education for Rohingya children who are living in Penang Island which is far away from Kuala Lumpur and there was not any single alternative school to provide education to refugees at that time. Thus, it is quite challenging to achieve the SDG No. 4 target in terms of the quality of education. In Malaysia scenario case, the state-actor is not obliged to provide a formal education and according to the former Education Minister, Mohd Radzi Md Jidin, refugees are only allowed to access the education by alternative guidance centers as other non-citizen children. Hence, non-state actors like UNHCR and NGOs took the initiative in the education sector by providing basic education for refugees so they can survive and communicate with other locals.

This challenge is also faced by UNHCR's implementing partners because they need to uphold the cost of operation since not receiving financial support from the government. The UNHCR office in Malaysia tries to allocate some funds to them but only in partial basis because they also need to support other alternative learning centers around Malaysia. Therefore, they need to collaborate with other NGOs to help Rohingyas children to further promote their study. This situation describes the non-state actor in Malaysia strives to reach the quality

of education by achieving some targets in SDG No. 4. This effort also leverages the goal of the SDGs and to achieve its motto of "leaving no one behind".

In conclusion, a quality education for Rohingya refugees in Malaysia can be addresses as work in progress due to the long road to achieve the SDG No. 4 and its challenges. The important stakeholders like UNHCR and NGOs should strengthen their collaboration and networking to improve the quality of education for refugees in Malaysia. On the other hand, they are also supposed to do an advocacy to the Malaysian government from time to time to explain the importance of refugee education in Malaysia. By having education, refugees can improve their quality of life and are able to contribute to the economy in the country. It can also be considered as preparation for them before they are selected to resettle and repatriate to their home country.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, AK and IA; methodology, SZ; software, SZ; validation, AK, IA and SZ; formal analysis, SZ; investigation, AK; resources, IA; data curation, IA; writing—original draft preparation, AK; writing—review and editing, IA; visualization, IA; supervision, AK; project administration, AK; funding acquisition, AK. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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