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Track II diplomacy in solving Asia's refugee crisis

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In February, experts from government, think tanks, civil society and academia met in Bangladesh for the ninth meeting of the Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM) ^[1] to address the challenge of people movement and displacement in the region. The dialogue has already seen some positive outcomes, and it highlights an important role for non-official actors in diplomacy.



An Australian think tank, the Centre for Policy Development ^[2], launched the ADFM in 2015 as a track II dialogue with a focus on regional cooperation. It facilitates non-official discussion among think tanks, civil society, academics and senior officials in their personal capacity. The objective is to progress more effective regional responses to forced migration ^[3] — a challenging and polarising issue where governments can find it difficult to cooperate.

The Asia Pacific region is a critical node ^[4] for more effective and durable policies towards migrants and refugees. The region is home to the world's largest displaced group ^[4], the Rohingya ^[5] people, and hosts the largest group of undocumented labour migrants and the highest number of displaced people and refugees. The Asia Pacific is also the most vulnerable to natural disasters ^[6] in terms of population affected and number of disasters. The threat of climate change ^[7] — including rising sea levels, desertification and extreme weather conditions — will only increase the risk of displacement. And in the time of COVID-19, displaced people and refugees are particularly vulnerable.

Given the magnitude of the challenges and difficulties of coordination among governments, any attempts to improve policy are welcome. The ADFM proactively addresses displacement and migration in the region through dialogue co-convened by policy institutes from Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand. While progress is at times incremental, its long-term goal is to build a resilient regional architecture on forced migration [3] with tangible benefits for displaced and refugee populations.

The ADFM focusses on opening lines of communication and building trust. It plays a necessary role in bringing together organisations already working in the forced migration space, such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) [8] and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) [9], with governments, think tanks and businesses to coordinate long-term policies and improve collective security within the region.

The track II dialogue is effective because it supplements existing government-to-government processes, specifically the Bali Process [10] on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime. Co-chaired by Australia and Indonesia, the Bali Process operates as a formal forum for official policy dialogue and cooperation in the region. The ADFM supports the Bali Process by driving genuine policy change [11] for refugees and stateless and trafficked persons.

It has already seen some positive outcomes. The ADFM's recommendations led the Bali Process to conduct a formal review [12] of the May 2015 Andaman Sea crisis and agree to create a regional consultation mechanism for sudden displacement.

It has since had a sustained focus on regional responses that can address the displacement of the Rohingya [13]. This includes successfully advocating for the Bali Process co-chairs to trigger an emergency response mechanism after the outbreak of the Rohingya crisis [14] in August 2017. This emergency mechanism allows senior officials to convene immediately after a crisis, fostering fast communication and coordination in urgent situations.

Prior to its ninth meeting in Dhaka, the ADFM took a small delegation of government and civil society leaders to Cox's Bazar to speak with the displaced Rohingya people to ascertain the best ways to support immediate and long-term responses. The visit also followed up on the ADFM's 2018 risk assessment [15], which showed that conditions for high levels of smuggling, trafficking and related exploitation [16] are present in Cox's Bazar.

It found that unless more action is taken on both sides of the border, risk factors and vulnerabilities — for example, lack of access to livelihoods and education — will intensify [16] the risks of trafficking, smuggling and exploitation over the next 24 months. The assessment recommended that the Myanmar government work towards the safe, dignified, voluntary and sustainable repatriation [16] of the Rohingya, alongside the full realisation of their human rights.

As a step forward, the ADFM Secretariat will propose to the Bali Process co-chairs for their ministers to commission an assessment of future regional priorities for forced migration responses, including an analysis of the progress made by Bali Process initiatives since the [2016 Bali Declaration](#) ^[17]. The ADFM and its network will also be considering what further measures can be implemented to protect highly vulnerable populations like the Rohingya people in Cox's Bazar from COVID-19.

The informal and neutral space that the ADFM provides is key to encouraging countries to align their domestic approaches with regional action. The forum moves beyond dialogue and fosters ongoing engagement and collaboration with countries across the Asia Pacific region. Its long-term goal is a [regional framework](#) ^[3] that will guide national actions and cooperation between states in response to forced migration, allowing countries to better protect vulnerable migrants and refugees. Given the large-scale intractable problems and official stalemate on a number of issues, any small steps are important.

The nature of [diplomacy today is rapidly evolving](#) ^[18] with an increasingly important role for non-official actors, including think tanks. Think tanks occupy an [important space](#) ^[18] between government and academia, and can be valuable to policymakers. The ADFM is just one example of think tanks involved in diplomacy in their own right.

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- [5] Rohingya: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/10/18/rohingya-refugees-trapped-in-limbo/>
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