Appraising the Education Provision for Refugee Children in Indonesia

Opinion Page

Summary

Education is one of the most basic primary needs for refugee children as a medium of self-actualization. With myriads of refugee children transiting in Indonesia, it needs tangible efforts in order for the refugee children to not be deprived of their right to education. Despite the current efforts pulled by the stakeholders, Indonesia should be more attentive to seize the day for the sake of the refugee children.

In accordance with UNHCR, approximately 13,528 refugees are registered in Indonesia (UNHCR, 2021). These refugees have been transiting in Indonesian urban areas while waiting to be resettled. In most cases, refugees have been transiting in Indonesia for more than three years where in the span of the said period they have been barred from accessing adequate forms of living and primary needs. UNHCR (2021) stated in their February 2021 fact sheet that 3,365 of those refugees are refugee children and many of them have no access to formal education despite existing efforts attempted by several stakeholders including the UNHCR, IOM, the Indonesian government, grassroots activism, and also the ASEAN. This op-ed would like to analyze, first, to what extent the existing efforts conducted by the government, international regime, and grassroot activism in Indonesia have accommodated refugee children' educational needs; and what Indonesia should improve in doing so. With that being said, this op-ed will also focus on narrating the education provision of refugees through policy enactment, bills, and social assistance by several stakeholders, including the Indonesian government, UNHCR, IOM, and grassroots activists.

The importance of education to refugee children

Why should this issue be deemed critical? Simply put, refugee children, just like the rest of us, are human beings. Human beings whose basic rights and basic needs are inherent and innate. Crea and Macfarland (2015) implies that education serves as a protective role for refugees and the local communities to integrate socially and security. Moreover, it is already common knowledge that all children are entitled to access adequate education. This is important because education is what shapes children’s behavior, amplifies their knowledge, and develops their social and interpersonal skills. Besides, children are also entitled to maintain their dignity. Once they fail to access primary education, it will also worsen their socio-economic vulnerabilities. Hence, it is essential for us to respect them through the provision of a conducive educational atmosphere, the reinforcement of self-confidence, and to shield them from all derogatory occurrences. No child should be barred against education regardless of their race, color, sex, language, religion, belief, their political, social, and economic background. Moreover, several scholars have made it clear that refugee and asylum seeker children could benefit from education as a stress relief which education provides as a “healing and therapeutic experience” (Hughes & Beirens, 2007). On top of that, Bircan & Sunata (2015) illustrated that education may serve as a safe space and to underline their social and political rights instead of the sufferings they have endured from the conflict. Therefore, this would allow them to build up their sociocultural interaction.

Government of Indonesia’s Efforts

Despite Indonesia’s absence on the 1951 Convention Relating Status of Refugees and the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees 1967, Indonesia cannot fully exempt themselves from the obligation of providing refugee children educa-
tional rights. This is because Indonesia is legally bound by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which Indonesia ratified in 1990 through KEPPRES No. 36 Tahun 1990 that provides a specialized obligation on the subject matter. Hence, several policies and efforts have been attempted to enroll children refugees to several accredited national schools by the Indonesian government, such as through the Ministry of Education Circular Letter No. 75253/A.A4/HK/2019 as the official directive. It is also noteworthy that most of the policies enacted by Indonesia in providing refugee children education are within the collaboration between UNHCR and other joint partners.

The efforts of regional and international regime
The international regime also has taken the matters into their hands, be it independently or through collaboration. UNHCR, with the help of several regional-based stakeholders (including but not limited to stakeholders in Jakarta and Makassar), also has been empowering refugee children to enroll in primary school. Refugee children have been taught to learn Bahasa Indonesia – to moderate the case of social disintegration through language barrier –, basic math, literacy, local customs, and culture. However, things do not seem too convincing for refugee children altogether. The UNHCR reported in its latest infographic the statistical data of the percentage of refugee children education inclusion in Indonesia that the gap still exists between Indonesian children and refugee children in Indonesia. In total, 1,900 out of 3,601 refugee children are not yet enrolled in primary education (UNHCR, 2021). This has been mitigated by several actors including UNHCR, IOM, and refugee-led communities by the provision of education through learning centers. Furthermore, UNHCR has collaborated with several private and public schools (e.g: SPH Lippo Karawaci), and NGOs in Indonesia (e.g: Dompet Dhuafa and Church World Service) in providing entries for refugee children. In Makassar, UNHCR has collaborated with the Kalla Group, the foundation of Athirah Islamic School, and SD Negeri Jongaya. In Jakarta, in partnership with the Academic College Group, UNHCR once held a one-day workshop for refugee children. This workshop was attended by 20 refugee children. The workshop consisted of several activities such as art projects, sports, and science lab activities. Another partner of UNHCR, Dompet Dhuafa, an Indonesia-based non-profit organization, has contributed through the provision of classes and teachers from Institut Guru Dompet Indonesia. One of their programs is the Indonesian language class. Dompet Dhuafa believes that it is necessary for refugee children to learn Indonesian so they can integrate socially and comprehend courses and materials taught in public schools (Mautanha, 2017). In addition to that, UNHCR has encouraged refugee children to undergo accredited courses through Coursera for Refugees. This is a free online learning platform equipped with additional non-formal educational, vocational, and recreational activities for refugee children. By the end of July 2021, 1,744 refugees are enrolled in online education platforms such as Coursera and EdX (UNHCR, 2021).

Despite the signs of progress made, refugee children still found hindrances and challenges such as limited knowledge in speaking Bahasa Indonesia, insufficient funding, and inadequate quotas for public schools in the region where most refugees reside. There were other forms of efforts enacted by the UNHCR and IOM. In 2019, 320 refugee children were granted access to attend primary schools ranging from kindergarten to secondary levels. But then again, the problem did not stop there. A human rights lawyer and program manager at SUAKA, Zico Pestalozzi, stated that refugee students will not be issued format certificates as a token of their education roadmap because there is no clear SOP determined to give refugee students certificates and document them into the National Education Database (Joindad, 2020). In addition to that, on a collaborative note with UNICEF, UNHCR has signed the Blueprint for Joint Action in December 2020. With this blueprint, UNHCR and UNICEF expressed their full commitment to consolidate effectively and efficiently with Indonesian officials to invigorate changes in the lives of refugees and internally displaced children on their education, protection, and WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene). This joint initiative has translated into several achievements, for example, the provision of psychosocial assistance and clear water and sanitation for Rohingya refugee children in Aceh. Furthermore, it also entails coordination with the Ministry of Women’s Empowerment and Child
Protection to enact the “Protocol for the Special Protection for Refugee children and International Refugee children”.

From ASEAN’s perspective, there has been no specific framework made addressing refugees caused by insufficient awareness by the member states. In fact, among the ASEAN nations, there are only two states (the Philippines and Cambodia) that ratified the refugee protocol. However, there were several frameworks made in handling the issue of human rights: 1) The ASEAN Declaration of Human Rights (ADHR) framework; 2) ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AIHCR); and 3) ASEAN Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children (ACWC). These frameworks serve the mandate to promote human rights values and to supervise the protection of women and children groups within the region. These frameworks could be used as the foundation of refugee protection in Southeast Asia. However, these frameworks have not been able to provide adequate protection to specifically refugees, because of the lack of provisions. This is caused by the limited authority of the existing frameworks that makes these commissions unable to encourage ASEAN states to stop the acts of human rights violations (Alva & Handayani, 2019). Therefore, ASEAN has been unable to pressure Indonesia into bettering the provision of protection for refugees, especially refugee children.

Grassroots activism supporting refugee children education

Some refugee children and asylum seekers decided to fulfill their educational needs with the help of philanthropic organizations because they are convinced to not rely on public schools (Kranrattanasuit, 2019). Over the past few years, there has been an increasing number of NGOs that have started to partake in child refugee issues. Some of them, such as the Cisarua Refugee Learning Center and Roshan Learning, have helped these refugee children through vocational training to develop their soft skills. CLRC has become one of the established learning institutes for refugee children and asylum seekers. Furthermore, Roshan Learning also provides a diploma to refugee children who have completed their education in the learning center that will enable them to pursue higher education in resettlement countries. The Sunrise Refugee Learning Center of Sandya Institute, which is Jakarta-based, provides various masterclasses to refugees, such as language class, computer class, arts and culture, and entrepreneurship (Tobing, 2018). However, according to Joniad (2020), only a few students have reached this stage.

Despite NGOs’ encouragement of refugee children to register in local schools, there was resistance directed to said advice. For one thing, asylum seekers and refugees are convinced that attending the local educational system will force them to put down deep connections they have with their culture of origin (Ali, Brisman, & Fiske, 2016). In addition to this resistance, according to the principal of RLC outside of Jakarta, Sikandar Ali, some of the students of the learning center are not able to attend classes regularly due to transportation costs. He also implied that this is something that the RLC can't help because they can't even sufficiently cover the transportation fees of the staff and the teachers from the donations they obtain. Hence, to make this sustainable, what should be done is for the government to improve the child refugee recruiting system in public schools and learning centers to reinforce these refugee children’ right to education and delegate its responsibility to ensure the provision of education for refugee children by collaboration with NGOs that have been licensed under the Ministry of Law and Human Rights. With the collaboration, these NGOs could seek experienced legal professionals, provide them necessary childcare training and assign them as legal guardians.

The appraisal

It might be safe to say that there are signs of progress that have been made, but it is imperative for us to not claim victory just yet. The glass ceilings might be shattered, but for sure it is yet to break. Although progress exists, it is still likely that refugee children in Indonesia have found themselves amidst exclusionary and inequitable education. Despite the efforts pulled by the international regime, the Indonesian government should amplify its own effort. What the government should consider is that providing refugee children access to an adequate education is a productive and worthy investment. It is crucial for us to emphasize the rights of refugee children and the important role of education in and of itself as a way to actu-
alize as a human being. If we want to talk about solvency, it is obvious what Indonesia should do. However, it is the awareness that needs to be internalized to give the Indonesian government the incentive to step in and seize the day for the sake of refugee children.
Further Reading

Journal


Further Reading

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