

Southeast Asia can share refugee responsibility – without a common regime

ASEAN won't build a regional refugee framework but a flexible approach is feasible and overdue.
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Life in Cox's Bazar refugee camp, where frustrations are growing (Sanjida Rahman/UN Women)

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The Rohingya crisis and the wider displacement generated by Myanmar's civil war[\(Opens in new window\)](#) have exposed a central weakness in Southeast Asia's regional architecture. While ASEAN presents itself as a guardian of regional stability, forced displacement – one of the region's most persistent cross-border challenges – remains managed largely through national responses.

Yet displacement does not respect borders. Maritime arrivals, trafficking networks, irregular migration, pressures on host communities, and diplomatic tensions spill across the region. Responsibility for managing the consequences remains fragmented among individual states.

ASEAN's limited role in refugee governance is often portrayed as a failure of regional cooperation[\(Opens in new window\)](#). Yet the obstacle is not simply institutional. The central challenge is to build practical forms of responsibility-sharing that address the regional consequences of displacement without requiring a common refugee regime.

The challenge begins with the diversity of refugee governance across the region. The Philippines, Cambodia, and Timor-Leste[\(Opens in new window\)](#) are parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention, providing them with formal legal frameworks for refugee protection, although implementation varies across context. Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand[\(Opens in new window\)](#) take a more pragmatic approach, accommodating refugees on a temporary basis and cooperating with international organisations without establishing pathways for permanent integration. Other states continue to view refugee movements primarily through migration control and national security lenses.

These differences help explain why ASEAN has never developed a common refugee regime. Member states hold different legal obligations, political priorities, governance capacities, and perceptions of risk. Under ASEAN's consensus-based model, regional initiatives generally advance only to the level acceptable to the most cautious governments.

ASEAN does not need every member state to adopt identical refugee policies, nor does it need to become a supranational refugee regime.

Yet consensus should not be mistaken for paralysis. ASEAN's history demonstrates that cooperation often emerges not through uniform policies but through managing disagreement and identifying areas of common interest. The question is therefore not how ASEAN can create a single refugee system, but how it can develop responsibility-sharing despite policy divergence among its members.

Responsibility-sharing is often associated with binding commitment that many ASEAN states are unlikely to accept. A more realistic approach would be flexible responsibility-sharing based on voluntary participation, differentiated contributions, and pragmatic coordination, enabling states to contribute in different but complementary ways.



The exodus of Rohingya from Myanmar after 2017 has seen few return (UN Women/Allison Joyce)

ASEAN would not be starting from scratch. While the [Bali Process](#) is not a refugee governance mechanism, it has facilitated regional cooperation on trafficking, people smuggling, and irregular migration linked to refugee movements. The [Global Compact on Refugees](#) has advanced responsibility-sharing through voluntary commitments. ASEAN's own institutions also provide foundations: the AHA Centre demonstrates the value of [regional humanitarian coordination](#), while the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration recognises the right to seek and receive asylum. These developments suggest a gradual shift from predominantly security-oriented approach toward greater recognition of humanitarian and human rights concerns.

The case for such cooperation is growing. Bangladesh has called for greater [ASEAN engagement](#) in creating conditions for safe and [sustainable](#)

[repatriation\(Opens in new window\)](#) of Rohingya refugees, showing the limits of relying on frontline states indefinitely. Meanwhile, growing frustrations in Cox's Bazar and renewed anti-Rohingya sentiment in [Bangladesh\(Opens in new window\)](#), [Indonesia\(Opens in new window\)](#) and [Malaysia\(Opens in new window\)](#), illustrate how protracted displacement can fuel social tensions, political backlash and discrimination.

These developments show that displacement is not only a humanitarian issue but also a regional stability challenge. Left unmanaged, it can exacerbate trafficking risks, strain social cohesion, and heighten tensions between states. Framing refugee governance in these terms may help sharpen the priorities ASEAN governments already share – including maritime security, border management, trafficking prevention, and social resilience.

At the same time, refugee governance cannot be viewed solely through a security lens. A purely securitised approach risks treating displaced populations as threats rather than rights-holders. ASEAN's gradual incorporation of humanitarian cooperation and human rights norms points to a more balanced approach that recognises both the security implications of displacement and the protection needs of those forced to flee.

As with many ASEAN initiatives, repeated practical cooperation can gradually establish expectations of collective responsibility without requiring major institutional change. ASEAN's enduring commitment to sovereignty and non-interference does not rule out practical forms of responsibility-sharing that are politically feasible and regionally relevant. ASEAN does not need every member state to adopt identical refugee policies, nor does it need to become a supranational refugee regime. What it does need is a greater recognition that forced displacement is no longer solely a domestic issue. Its causes may originate within states, but its consequences affect the region as a whole.

About the author

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