



Education for Rohingya Refugee Children in Malaysia: The Assessment of Sustainable Development Goals for Quality Education

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Abstract. Rohingya refugee children are among the most vulnerable groups in the world. Despite the persecution that they received from the Myanmar government, the negative stigma towards them has worsened their conditions. Hence, education is the only way to change their lives across generations. However, while residing in Malaysia, these children have limitations in accessing formal education in national schools and most probably enrol in Alternative Learning Centres (ALC). Meanwhile, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on “Quality Education” emphasize the need to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote opportunities for lifelong learning for all. Consequently, this study argues that every child deserves the right to education regardless of their status. In-depth interviews with informants involving four key persons representing policymakers and implementers, and 10 Rohingya parents were collected to examine the extent of quality education being emphasised for Rohingya children in Malaysia. The result of the analysis found that the Rohingya refugee children received limited quality education due to no access to formal education, in which education was only provided at ALCs.

Keywords: Rohingya refugee, Education, Sustainable Development Goals

1 Introduction

The exodus of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia has come into the intention of various parties, as they have been oppressed and punished by the Myanmar government several decades ago. They have been recognised as asylum seekers who seek protection and security from violence that some consider ethnic cleansing [1, 2, 3]. Even though the discussion and debates surrounding this issue continue to gain global attention, the problems seem to have no absolute solutions. Malaysia, which first received and treated them on a humanitarian basis, has now become more in a dilemma about assisting their

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living in Malaysia. This is due to the fact that Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees [4, 5, 6].

The growth of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia is worrying because it has various implications from different angles. Among the most listed concerns about the rise in their numbers is the practise of their human rights in the transit country, including rights to education among Rohingya children. In 2015, realising that education is a mechanism to shape the behaviour of children who are future leaders, the United Nations introduced the Sustainable Development Goals, which consist of 17 main goals and the fourth goal—quality education—which has been thoroughly listed with the particular aim of ensuring that no one is left behind [7].

2 Literature Review

2.1 Rohingya Refugee Children in Malaysia

According to the data from UNHCR, the number of refugee children in Malaysia as of September 2023 was 50,170, and more than half of this number were Rohingya refugee children [8]. Being born as refugee children is not their choice. They have to live in a world that is not welcoming to them, becoming one of the most vulnerable groups. Some of these vulnerable groups have been living in traumatic conditions due to the persecutions of the Myanmar government, which have resulted in seeking protection from others. Meanwhile, some of them who are born in this transit country and continuously live as stateless people due to their inability to register themselves, as their parents might be undocumented or illegal immigrants.

The debates on Rohingya refugee children continue to rise, this can be seen through a number of media highlights especially related to the social problems involving these groups of people [9]. Rohingya issue has gained attention from many parties; and some parties have realised the importance of educating Rohingya refugee children, as education is the main tool to assist their survival [10]. However, this awareness has become a challenge due to the Malaysian government's refusal to become a party to the 1951 Convention. Although Malaysia is a state member of the 1989 Child Rights Convention (CRC), the Malaysian government has made reservations on Article 28—the right to education in primary schools for free. This reservation has put the Malaysian government in a dilemma about fulfilling the rights of refugee children [11].

2.2 Education for Children in Malaysia

The education system in Malaysia is governed by the 1996 Education Act and the National Education Policy, which are improving over time. At present, the policy-related policy is the 2017 National Education Policy. Based on Section 29A, Amendment 2002, education has been compulsory at the primary level for all Malaysian [12]. Besides, based on the 2017 Educational National Policy, it is the aim of the government to provide education and has ruled that compulsory education at the primary level is for all local children [13].

Since Malaysia's first master plan in 1956, most of the focus spend by the Malaysian government has been on agricultural, economic and social development [14]. As education is part of social development for the nation, the priority in providing

education has been highlighted from time to time. In fact, the importance of education has been on the agenda in the yearly budget allocation announcement, whereby, for five years in a row, the education sector has been the biggest budget allocation among all ministries in Malaysia [15]. However, due to current government policies, the allocation of this national education agenda is only applicable to local Malaysians, as free education in national schools is limited to Malaysian citizens.

2.3 Education for Rohingya Refugee Children

Prior and until 2002, Malaysians granted undocumented children the right to enrol in national schools; however, this policy has been changed [16]. Regarding that decision, the Malaysian government then emphasised the alternative institution for the refugee to get an education, even though they were unable to fully benefit the national educational system. The Malaysian government has introduced alternative education, which consists of alternative learning institutions run by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or community-based organisations (CBOs) [17]. This alternative institution is most of the time monitored by the UNHCR and the Ministry of Education. Through these alternative centres, it provides access to education for those who do not possess any citizenship or are considered stateless or undocumented [18].

Moreover, even though Malaysia has signed the 1989 CRC, which includes the provision of free education in primary schools for all children regardless of their status, the reservation that was applied by the Malaysian government towards this article contradicts the spirit of giving free education, including to those Rohingya refugees [11]. The refugees need to blend with the new society as part of their survival strategy through quality education. This is because through education, it is not only the basic rights that they can possess but also their most valuable asset that they can own [19].

2.4 Sustainable Development Goals: Quality Education

The importance of education for refugee children cannot be denied. It influenced the children's development and survival, especially in transit or third countries [18, 20]. Studies done by researchers also indicated that children without education will have certain social implications, such as being victims of human trafficking and sexual assault [21, 22]. Realizing the need to provide quality education to all children, the United Nations introduced a global agenda known as the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 as a mechanism for cooperation among nations in achieving the same mission.

Through SDG 4, the main aim is to ensure all children, regardless of their gender and status, are able to complete primary and secondary education freely by 2030. Besides, it also includes the target to eliminate all discrimination in education that indirectly assists those in vulnerable conditions, like refugees, to also be considered for quality education and lifelong learning opportunities [23]. In addition, while quality education encompasses broad aspects highlighted in the Education 2030 Framework for Actions, the most pertinent discussion is; (1) inclusivity; (2) equity; and (3) accessibility.

Inclusivity has been described as quality education that should be inclusive and not discriminate against any groups. This includes ensuring access to education for children with disabilities, indigenous populations, and marginalised groups. Meanwhile, in

terms of equity, education should be equitable, whereby all individuals have the same opportunities to access quality education regardless of their background, location, or circumstances. Lastly, in terms of accessibility, quality education should be accessible to all, including girls and boys, women and men, and those living in rural and remote areas. Barriers to access, such as lack of transportation or gender discrimination, should be removed [24]. However, in the latest United Nations General Assembly held in New York on September 20, 2023, the reports on SDG implementation have been summarised and presented based on each goal. Notably, the result of SDG 4 on quality education somehow brings attention and alerts many parties, as it reports; “the world is falling far behind in achieving quality education” [25].

3 Methodology

A qualitative approach has been used to assess the quality of education with regards to Rohingya refugee children through semi-structured interviews with the informants. Through this qualitative approach, it was able to help the study construct a detailed explanation based on the collected data. By using the qualitative approach, it helps the study find data that is well grounded and can lead to fruitful descriptions and explanations [26]. The primary data for this study were collected via in-depth interviews with key persons who have various experiences in handling and managing refugee issues in Malaysia which are: (1) the National Security Council (NSC); (2) the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA); (3) the Ministry of Education (MOE); and (4) the Immigration Department of Malaysia (IDM). Furthermore, 10 Rohingya parents who were selected were those who had sent their children to any ALCS. During data collection with Rohingya parents, a casual Malay language was used to communicate with them. A Rohingya representative helped to explain the questions using their local languages; and further translate the feedback from the informants to the researchers. This technique is useful to gather feedback from non-native speakers to ensure their understanding and appropriate feedback [27].

4 Findings

This study aims to highlight the assessment of providing quality education for Rohingya refugee children in Malaysia. In the context of this study, the main elements of inclusivity, equity and accessibility have been used in discussing the quality of education for this vulnerable group. Based on the findings, the assessments are classified based on an analysis of data collection, which also includes accessibility and opportunity to a quality education and the issues and challenges.

4.1 No Access in National Schools

The first agenda highlighted SDGs for quality education is free primary and secondary education for children regardless of status by the year 2030. However, the main assessment in this matter has shown that education accessibility and opportunity for the Rohingya refugee children are still far behind, whereby they are not able to enrol in the

free schooling system provided in the national schools, either at the primary or secondary level. This has been mentioned by the informants as below:

[...] The Ministry of Education is one of the agencies responsible for implementing the government's policy. We are unable to accept to enrolment in national schools [...] refugees do not have the opportunity to attend national schools. (Key Person 3, MOE)

Meanwhile, the Rohingya parents also knew that they were not allowed to enrol their children in the national schools. Some of them understand the limitations as refugees and have decided to enrol in an alternative institution, such as an ALC or a private tuition centre.

I think it's difficult for the Rohingya children to go to national school. But here, they can attend this centre [...] my friends told me that this ALC free. (Parent 3, 34 years old)

4.2 Government Policy

Furthermore, this study also indicates that the limitations on access and opportunity in the national schools align with government policy. Previously, the Malaysian government once allowed the enrolment of non-citizens in the national school. However, due to certain circumstances, the policy has been changed to be in line with other related acts or policies, such as the Immigration Act, as follows:

Prior to 2002, refugees were indeed permitted to attend school. However, it is important to note that this policy primarily applied to refugees residing in non-urban areas. As a result, the government was able to provide educational opportunities to a manageable number of refugees during that time. (Key Person 1, NSC)

4.3 Undocumented and Illegal Immigrants

Based on the finding, the provision of quality education in terms of inclusivity, equity and accessibility has been directly influenced by the status of Rohingya refugees themselves as undocumented or illegal immigrants. As part of government policy, including the related acts and laws, one of them pertains to their status as undocumented or illegal immigrants. Hence, it hindered their ability to receive free education even at the primary level.

It is stated in the government policy that these refugees are classified as Undocumented Foreign Immigrants or illegal immigrants, even if they hold UNHCR cards. Therefore, the opportunities for education in national schools are quite limited for them. (Key Person 3, MOE)

The limitation in accessing the national schools is also known to the Rohingya refugee parents. They are alerts on the prohibition to enrol in the schools even though they possess the UNHCR card as refugees.

Those holding UNHCR cards are not allowed to register and attend national schools here. (Parent 3, 34 years old)

4.4 Density in urban area

Furthermore, the other concern highlighted by the informants in accessing the free educational system is due to density in the urban area. It has been mentioned that most of the Rohingya refugees most likely resided in urban areas, especially Lembah Klang. Hence, the density of local students in national schools strengthens the lack of opportunity and accessibility to enrol in public schools for Rohingya refugee children.

[...] the main challenge lies in urban schools, which have limited capacity. This poses a difficulty in providing educational opportunities for both Rohingya children and Malaysian children. We face constraints in catering to the needs of our own citizens. (Key Person 1, NSC)

Even though the Malaysian government has restricted the Rohingya refugee children in terms of opportunity and accessibility to a free educational system in primary and secondary schools, especially the national schools, some consideration has been given to providing opportunities in alternative institutes. However, this alternative institution has several limitations to ensure a quality education can be provided to the Rohingya refugee children in Malaysia.

4.5 Enrolment in Alternative Learning Centres (ALCs)

The establishment of ALCs has proven the responsibility of the Malaysian government in managing refugee issues. Despite being a non-signatory to the 1951, Malaysia has granted the operation of ALCs that are dominated by refugee and stateless children in Malaysia. Though it is run by NGOs or CBOs, the opportunity given has been a platform for the Rohingya refugees to at least benefit from education.

[...] yes, there are opportunities for education through ALCs. We are currently implementing improvements. Although it may seem like we are neglecting them, in reality, we are working on enhancements through collaborations with other stakeholders. (Key Person 1, NSC)

Even though most of the institutions are monitored by the UNHCR and Ministry of Education, several limitations occur in gaining quality education, as highlighted in SDG 4. Among the limitations highlighted by the informants are regarding the schooling system, syllabus and accreditation.

This alternative centre only offers a two-day schooling system per week. From 8 a.m. until 12 p.m. It's only four hours. (Parent 8, 33 years old)

[...] but you know the level of education, the standards are not there. (Key Person 4, IDM)

5 Discussion

5.1 Inclusivity, Equity and Accessibility

The inclusivity in quality education reminds us of the non-discrimination towards any group. This indirectly aligns with the target of eliminating all discrimination in education. Hence, the right to education includes children with disabilities, indigenous groups of people and those in vulnerable situations. Meanwhile, in terms of equity, it highlights that education should be equitable, whereby all people have the same opportunities to access quality education regardless of their background, location, or even situation. In addition, for access, it required accessibility for all, including those living in a suburban or remote area [24]. Obstacles that appear in having access to education should be tackled seriously. In the context of this study, the Rohingya refugees fall under those who are in vulnerable situations, as they are the ones who seek refuge and seek protection from others. Hence, accessibility to quality education should not be discriminated against these Rohingya refugee children.

The debates on the basic human rights that fight for education continue at another level due to Malaysia's decision that received Rohingya refugees on a humanitarian basis. Furthermore, even though Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention, that should not be the premise for not providing quality education for the Rohingya refugee children. This is due to the fact that Malaysia is still a signatory to the 1989 CRC and also responsible for achieving the SDG goals, and in the context of this study, SDG 4 is providing quality education regardless of status. Based on these situations, it certainly put Malaysia in a dilemma. However, the commitment of the Malaysian government to providing opportunity and accessibility in education for all children should not be denied.

5.2 Inclusivity, Equity and Accessibility

In discussing the responsibility of providing quality education for Rohingya children in Malaysia, various angles should be considered. Firstly, in terms of the readiness of the Malaysian government to provide accessibility to quality education. As this aim involves free education, it is believed that the effort will have more financial implications for the transit country. Managing the density of children in urban areas, combined with the large number of refugee children in the same area, has required the government to double up efforts in managing the education opportunities for the refugee children, especially the Rohingya, just to ensure quality education can be provided.

Notably, in order to provide free education for all, first and foremost, it requires opportunity and accessibility for them. The current policy of free education is only

accessible in national schools. This indirectly influenced the target in SDG 4: to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes by 2030. As a result, the best option provided by the Malaysian government is to allow enrolment in alternative centres such as the ALC, the Private Centre, and the Madrasah or Tahfiz. Most of the ALCs require registration with certain fees, and most likely among the lowest fee entrance, comprehend the struggles of Rohingya parents in sending the children. However, from another perspective, the fee charge acts as a commitment from the parents, resulting in less absenteeism and drop-off among the refugee children in this ALC.

5.3 Syllabus

Besides, quality education can also be discussed based on the syllabus provided in the ALC. There are centres using the local syllabus created by the Malaysian Ministry of Education. The issue with using this syllabus is that children are not able to take part in any exams under the Malaysian school system to further their level of study. On the other hand, there is an option for an international syllabus known as the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). Through the IGCSE, the children have a better opportunity to continue their studies once they have been repatriated to the third country. In addition, the exam provided under IGCSE can be a platform for them to further their studies, even at the tertiary level. However, the problem that is always interrelated with this opportunity is the fee charged, which is slightly higher than other platforms. Hence, the Rohingya parents are struggling to benefit from the opportunity for a better formal education system due to financial issues.

Besides, though it is considered the same if those Rohingya enrol in the national schools, it eventually needs a special mitigation framework for managing these Rohingya children. This is due to the fact that the local syllabus used in the national school is not a platform for the Rohingya refugee children to continue their studies abroad once they have been relocated. In addition, providing national schools for free has a certain impact on the opportunity for them to assimilate with local people, reducing the stigma faced by these Rohingya children. Hence, the consideration of enrolling in the national schools for the sake of achieving quality education should be properly organised to avoid future problems.

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