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# Navigating the Infinite Timeline: Social Integration of Refugees in Long-term Transit

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## Abstract

*Ager and Strang's ten-domain framework for integration is premised on permanent resettlement. For refugees in transit, the impermanence of settlement means that many domains are impossible to reach. This study centres on the integration of the transit refugee community in Cisarua, Bogor. Through analyses of the literature and qualitative research, it suggests that tight social bonds and a shared goal of educating their children has enabled the community to either improve or maintain conditions in all domains. Their community-building activities indicate that refugees, even those in transit, can be agents of self-help and assets to host societies. Thus, there is untapped potential to jointly improve the lives of both refugees and locals through integration. More fundamentally, policymakers need to take into account the human and social capital of refugee communities so that protracted integration process can elapse as humanely and productively as possible.*

**Keywords:** *Refugee, Asylum Seeker, Transit Migration, Social Integration, Cisarua, Bogor*

## 1. Introduction

The global refugee population has reached record highs (UNHCR 2017a, 13), leading to a pressing need for durable resettlement solutions. Integration of refugees within local communities has been recognised as a more desirable and sustainable option to the 'care and maintenance' or 'warehousing' models of assistance (Jacobsen 2001, 3).

One well-known framework for integration is the indicators developed by Ager and Strang (2004; 2008). By synthesising a comprehensive range of documents, concepts, fieldwork and survey data, Ager and Strang proposed ten domains for holistic integration in policy and in practice. However, along with much of integration research (see for example SRC 2010; Kindler *et. al.* 2015), this framework was designed in developed third countries of resettlement. It assumes that a permanent place of resettlement has been reached. The reality is that developing regions now host 84% of the world's refugees (UNHCR 2017a, 2), many of which face vulnerable conditions of prolonged but nevertheless impermanent settlement. A cursory examination reveals that fulfilment of many of Ager and Strang's domains is either impossible or severely curtailed in such contexts. Yet, as noted by transit migration scholar Antje Missbach, "*even though they may be prevented from formally becoming naturalised and integrated, transit migrants assimilate into the host society, simply because they work, consume and mingle*" (2015).

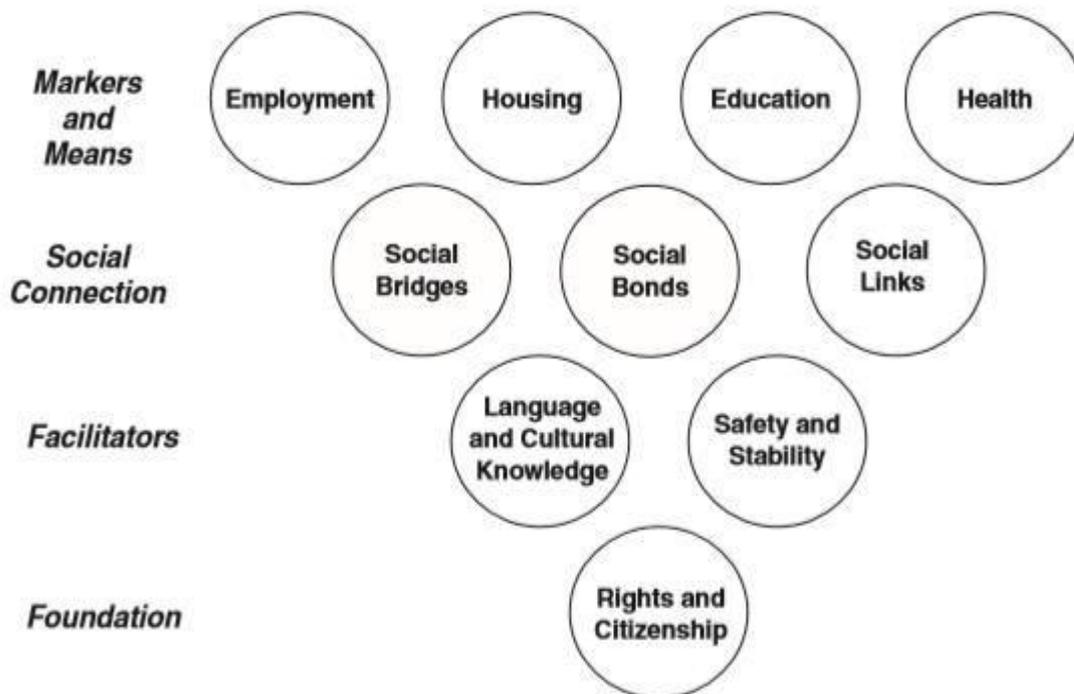
Refugees in Indonesia are one such group in limbo. The refugee community in Cisarua, Bogor is noteworthy due to the array of community-building activities its members have undertaken, attracting media and academic interest from within Indonesia and around the world. The initiatives, most notably the refugees' self-run learning centres, have helped restore some semblance of normality,

productivity and meaning to their time in transit. Successes notwithstanding, the refugee community still faces considerable barriers to integration stemming from being denied basic work and study rights due to their temporary status.

Thus, this paper explores how Cisarua’s refugees navigate integration in conditions of impermanent settlement. It begins by reviewing the literature on refugees in Indonesia in the context of transit migration, and outlining research methods. It then presents the study’s findings structured around Ager and Strang’s integration framework, and discusses the challenges and opportunities associated with each domain. The paper finishes by drawing lessons from the case of the Cisarua community, with applications for transit communities around the world.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 The integration framework



**Figure 1 The integration framework**

Source: Ager and Strang 2008

As seen in figure 1, Ager and Strang’s conceptual framework attempts to capture holistically the elements of refugee and migrant integration. A refugee, according to article 1(A)(2) of the 1951 Refugee Convention, is someone 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”.

An asylum seeker is someone whose application for asylum—that, is to be recognised as a refugee—has not yet been concluded (UNHCR 2017b). For clarity of expression, the term ‘refugee’ applies to both refugees and asylum seekers for the remainder of this paper.

Borne out of a 2002 study by the UK Home Office, Ager and Strang’s indicators recognise that successful resettlement depends on integration as ‘full and equal citizens’ of the host society. Key activities in the public arena such as obtaining employment, education, housing and healthcare services are an emergent theme labelled ‘markers and means’. However, Ager and Strang believe

public outcomes are insufficient indicators, given the wide variation of employment, education, housing and healthcare experiences. Thus, they posit that citizenship and rights are a necessary foundation, setting responsibilities and expectations of the host society towards refugees. Two further themes are identified to mediate between this foundation and public outcomes: facilitators that remove barriers to integration, and social connections that drive the two-way interactions of refugee and host (Ager & Strang 2004; Ager & Strang 2008).

Much has been written about local integration as a durable solution. Isolating refugees, such as through encampment, is doubly counterproductive because refugees must be given the resources to survive whilst not being able to contribute to the host society. Aside from the economic burden, it also comes at a severe human cost including mental health problems and impaired childhood development, exposure to violence, abuse and exploitation, inadequate education and healthcare and social isolation and discrimination (Button *et. al.* 2016, 3). Conversely, giving refugees tools and freedoms for ‘self-help’ is not only more sustainable but can benefit the host society (Dick 2003). The UNHCR has lauded cases such as the extensive opportunities offered to refugees in Tanzania (2011).

## 2.2 Transit refugees in Indonesia

As a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Indonesia does not allow refugees to settle permanently. This has been the subject of a sizeable body of research originating from Australia, which can be attributed to Indonesia’s history as a transit point for refugees seeking entry to Australia. The tightening of Australian asylum seeker policies over the past two decades has incited a flurry of debate, research interest and civil rights campaigns.

Antje Missbach, based in Australia’s Monash University, has studied the phenomenon of transit migration and ‘stuckedness’. According to Missbach, Indonesia has a history of weak capacity to administer, accommodate or resettle refugees. Jakarta has authorised UNHCR to carry out refugee status determination and identify durable solutions (UNHCR, 2017c). Indonesia’s refugees mainly come from Afghanistan, Somalia, Myanmar, Iraq, and various other countries in the Middle East and Africa (UNHCR 2016a). The first wave of refugees arrived in 1996, fleeing due to poor political and economic conditions—for Afghans in particular, it was the rise of the Taliban and escalating mistreatment of ethnic and religious minorities. After many countries of first asylum—such as Pakistan, Iran, Jordan and Syria—failed to protect refugees, Indonesia became a transit point in the global smuggling networks that sprung up in their wake (Missbach 2013, 295-6).

Indonesia expected to only be handling refugees temporarily (*Ibid.*, 296-7, 302), whereas in practice the wait time soon stretched from days to years. Lack of support offered by Jakarta induced many to soon try to leave, birthing a people-smuggling network from Indonesia to Australia. In 2001, in response to surging numbers of asylum seekers arriving by boat, Australia’s Howard Government began intercepting and transferring arrivals to offshore processing in what became known as the ‘Pacific Solution’ (Phillips 2012, 2). A policy of indefinite mandatory detention continues to this day (Refugee Council 2017). Moreover, asylum seekers who registered in Indonesia after June 2014 now have no prospect of resettlement in Australia (ABC 2014).

While boat arrivals to Australia have stopped, refugees are still coming to Indonesia in a situation described as a “bottleneck” (Topsfield 2016). Surrounded by other countries hosting large numbers of asylum seekers and refugees, Indonesia’s stance has been described as one of tolerance and “benevolent neglect” (Missbach & Tan 2016). This position of tolerance was codified in late 2016 when President Joko Widodo signed a Presidential Regulation, which is set to improve working relationships between the Indonesian Government and UNHCR (UNHCR 2017c). The latest decree does not, however, address rights to work or education (Varagur 2017). Currently, over 4000 of Indonesia’s 14,000 refugees are housed in 13 overcrowded detention centres across the archipelago;

others live in shelters managed by the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) and temporary accommodation, or live unassisted in the community (*Ibid.*). Since the 14,000 figure counts only those who have registered with UNHCR, the true number of people in need may be much higher—including as many as 7000 children (Button *et. al.* 2016, 34).

Researchers Linda Briskman and Lucy Fiske, assisted by former refugee Muzafar Ali, have written extensively on the refugee experience in Indonesia. Upon arrival in Indonesia, an individual fleeing persecution first registers with UNHCR, without which they are vulnerable to arrest (Ali *et. al.* 2016, 3). They are considered an asylum seeker until their Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedure is finalised. The waiting time for RSDs in Indonesia has ballooned to over 24 months as the number of arrivals continues to rise (UNHCR 2016b). Those found to be refugees then face an “infinite timeline” (pers. comm. with refugee in Cisarua, 27 October 2017) of waiting for the chance of resettlement in a third country, as they have no prospect of permanent resettlement in Indonesia. Major challenges involve livelihood and financial difficulty, health, safety and security, lack of legal rights, mental health, boredom and education for children (Ali *et. al.* 2016, 3). With no right to social security or employment, refugees must rely on their own savings, assets or the support of relatives and friends to survive. This becomes a massive burden over the years, especially as their families and friends are often leading precarious lives themselves (*Ibid.*, 4). The challenge of living without an income for years lead many to “sacrifice their freedom for food” (Missbach 2014) by surrendering themselves to overcrowded immigration detention. UNHCR staff visit detention centres on a slow rotation, prolonging wait times. The long and unclear resettlement process, distance from their families, and lack of recreation and freedom of movement all add to the stress, leading one refugee to commit suicide in 2015 (Ali *et. al.* 2016, 4).

### 2.3 *The refugees of Cisarua, Bogor*

The unique focus of Ali, Briskman, and Fiske’s research is the refugee community in Cisarua, Bogor. There are between 3,000 to 5,000 refugees in the area (*Ibid.*, 2), mainly Afghan Hazaras (CRLC 2017). Renting accommodation from Indonesians, most are supported by family and friends abroad. A minority receive a small allowance from the NGO Jesuit Refugee Service and a group of Sri Lankan asylum seekers meet their basic needs through sharing and food support from a local temple. Conscious of their non-belonging, the refugees feel constantly pressured to live under the radar despite reporting generally positive relationships with local Indonesians.

Education is a prominent concern for parents. While in theory children recognised as refugees have access to local schools, this is noted to be rare in practice due to the language barrier, for which there is a lack of learning support (Ali *et. al.* 2016, 4.). Those accepted into schools face an additional challenge of paying for uniforms and books (Sampson *et. al.* 2016, 1142) as well as cultural barriers. Waters and Leblanc point out that refugee education is inherently challenging as schooling is administered by nation-states and tailored to their visions and notions of citizenship (2005). Thus, even if refugees in Cisarua did enrol in local schools, they would be learning for the imagined future of Indonesia—neither their home country nor their envisioned third country of resettlement.

In response to this problem, the refugees of Cisarua came together to start their own learning centres, with the first being established in August 2014 (CRLC 2017, see figure 2). These have become dynamic social hubs, fostering trust among refugees, discussions of common concerns and ultimately a powerful sense of community. Fiske has described these activities as “the most effective predeparture preparation program I have encountered” (2017).



**Figure 2 Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre**  
Source: CRLC 2017

### **3. Methodology**

This paper applies the concept of refugee integration to the transit community in Cisarua, Bogor, thereby exploring the challenges and opportunities of non-permanent settlement. Field observation of the Hazara refugee community in September 2017 provided qualitative background information and avenues for secondary research. The secondary research synthesised data from academic papers, media articles and documents of relevant institutions to obtain the contextual underpinnings of the transit migration experience. In October 2017, two follow-up interviews were conducted with refugees involved in the founding of the learning centres. These interviews were verified and explored in greater depth on the issues raised in the research process. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and paired with Ager and Strang's integration indicators. Further primary research could not be conducted due to time and resource constraints.

### **4. Results and discussion**

Table 1 summarises the Cisarua refugees' attainment of integration, comparing initial conditions with the impact of community. Remarkably, it shows that accomplishments of self-help have either improved or maintained initial conditions in all domains.

The results suggest three main findings. Firstly, refugees in transit have the greatest control over the quality of their social connections. Secondly, social bonds not only had positive effects in and of themselves, but also had ripple effects across the markers and means of integration. Thirdly, on the flip side, social bonds had little effect on the other themes. A likely explanation is that the theme of rights and citizenship hinges on government policy and local law, and there is little point speaking of facilitating access to those rights when they are absent to begin with.

**Table 1 Integration of refugees in Cisarua, Bogor**

Theme	Domain	Level of achievement		Quotes
		Initial conditions	Cisarua community	
Foundation	Rights and citizenship	None	None	<i>We are considered not legal here because Indonesia has not signed the Convention. So, they only allow us to stay here.</i>
Facilitators	Language and cultural knowledge	None	Limited	<i>Every day things, very simple things. Very simple conversation, I understand.</i>
	Safety and stability	Medium	Medium	<i>It's a safe country as a whole; , the people around us are very friendly</i>
Social connections	Social bridges	None	Limited	<i>...among the locals, we live very separately; I don't have any friend, I don't have regular contact; We have a lot journalists, we have a lot of researchers.</i>
	Social bonds	Medium	High	<i>Everyone is very close to me here; we're just doing our best, what is in our power, to help the children, the community,</i>
	Social links	Limited	Limited	<i>they don't give us any rights to healthcare, education, things like that; Same Skies helped a lot</i>
Markers and means	Employment	None	Medium	<i>I did not know we are not allowed to work; I think the main problem is the right to work. I think if they gave us that right, a lot of other problems could be solved.</i>
	Housing	Medium	Medium	<i>this is a house, not a home; I feel comfortable, I feel safe, but this is not my destination; we tried to find house that is cheap; if we rent a new place we don't have anyone to support us</i>
	Education	Limited	Medium	<i>what we do is try to provide very basic education and teach the refugee kids English so when they move to a third country they will have less problems; besides coming here to get education, there's absolutely no opportunities for the children.</i>
	Health	Medium	Medium	<i>I think I was healthier back home; most of the hospitals, they do not recognise the refugees, and the language problem, the financial problem; clinics here, it's not expensive... a specialist, then it's expensive</i>

#### 4.1 Foundation

The difficulties of transit life in Indonesia stem fundamentally from lack of rights and citizenship. As stated by Ager and Strang, “*notions of nationhood and citizenship shape core understandings of the rights accorded, and responsibilities expected, of refugees*” (2008, 175). These notions consequently define the foundation of government integration policy and shape the way refugees are viewed and treated at large. Where rights are not equal, there is less respect (*Ibid.*, 176).

Indonesia does not grant citizenship and rights to its refugees, who are only tolerated on a temporary basis. Idealistically, Indonesia's ratification of international human rights treaties (ICCPR and ICESCR) obligates it to provide basic protections. However, the 2016 Presidential Decree on refugees formalised Indonesia's position that they have no chance of permanent resettlement or citizenship in the country: the only options are repatriation or resettlement in a third country (Missbach & Tan 2017).

The absence of rights and citizenship is the most fundamental barrier to social integration. Its effects range from the legal-administrative to the social and psychological. The former is the most overt: adults are deprived of a source of stable income and the autonomy it brings, while children miss out on a full education during a critical period of development. Healthcare services may not recognise refugee documentation, leading to administrative challenges. These constraints on contributing and participating in everyday social activities lead to a default of isolation rather than integration. In interviews, refugees indicated that the ability to work and study would make the single biggest difference to leading a meaningful life in transit.

Aside from the direct denial of societal participation, lack of rights also leads to extreme boredom and uncertainty encapsulated by feelings of 'stuckedness' or 'permanent temporariness' (Missbach 2015). Especially for young people, waiting in transit is perceived to waste valuable years of life. Whether they repatriate or resettle, they will restart their lives years behind their peers in terms of careers and relationships. Human capital in fact deteriorates over time due to limited opportunities to put skills and "habits of functioning in normal economic conditions" (Konyndyk 2005) to use, as well as the mental health toll of protracted waiting and uncertainty. Finally, due to lack of rights, Indonesia is seen as a fundamentally non-permanent place of residence. This undercuts not only refugees' ability to integrate but also their willingness, for instance when it comes to developing local language beyond basic everyday phrases, mixing with locals or learning more about Indonesian culture.

## 4.2 Facilitators

Concepts of exclusion and inclusion are associated with the metaphor of 'removing barriers' to social participation (Ager & Strang 2008, 182). However, breaking down barriers is not easy. A significant factor is that it is impossible to lower barriers to accessing rights when they are denied to start with.

### 4.2.1 Language and cultural knowledge

Language competence is consistently identified as central to integration and, in the very least, social interaction. This is a 'two-way' street, as host communities can reduce barriers to information access, for example through translation and interpreting services (*Ibid.*, 181). Less emphasised but often highlighted in research is the value of cultural knowledge. It facilitates social connection as well as expectations and customs in everyday life.

Adjusting to a different culture is not straightforward, especially when refugees are isolated from their own culture (*Ibid.* 183). The refugees in Cisarua tend to develop a rudimentary level of Indonesian language for everyday life, especially over a prolonged period of waiting. However, due to the non-permanence of settlement and lack of language learning resources, there is limited interest in furthering language competence. This raises challenges when accessing services such as healthcare and local education. Some refugees do develop a higher level of fluency, usually correlating with having Indonesian friends or even partners. However, the focus is on learning English, which is seen as an international language necessary for eventual resettlement.

The few connections and language barrier between Indonesians and refugees limit cultural exchanges. Most of Cisarua's refugees instead find belonging through association and shared experiences with

other refugees. This, however, results in a ‘ghetto’ phenomenon wherein refugees are excluded from local interaction, institutions and political and economic systems despite physical proximity (Briskman & Fiske 2018, 25). The development of cultural knowledge is further limited by travel restrictions that prevent refugees from appreciating the depth and breadth of Indonesia, which is instead experienced as a constraining transit point. Locals, on the other hand, are often uninformed about the refugee situation, creating a reinforcing cycle of social segregation.

#### 4.2.2 *Safety and stability*

Though not prominent in definitions and indicators of integration, safety and stability emerge as common themes during community interviews (Ager & Strang 2008, 184). Refugees tend to seek ‘peaceful’ localities that give them a sense of personal safety. Stability was also valued in terms of the continuity of relationships.

The refugees in Cisarua report feeling generally safe residing amongst Indonesian locals. Nevertheless, they “live in a liminal zone of tolerance and exclusion” (Ali *et. al.* 2016, 4) as their security feels conditional on blending in and living under the radar. This has translated into a reluctance to draw attention through broader community engagement, although this attitude has improved with the establishment of refugee learning centres across the area. Overall, the desire to stay out of trouble has exacerbated locals’ misinformation or unawareness of the refugees living in their midst.

Stability is also an issue as the Cisarua community by nature lacks continuity. Individuals spend anywhere between a year and a half to several years in Indonesia, never knowing with certainty how much longer they will be there. This complicates community planning and leadership. Some refugees have stated that those who are resettled often lose contact and fail to support the transit community whence they came, as they become preoccupied with integrating into the new country. Lack of financial security also impacts the stability of transit life. Refugees who expected one to two-year wait times lack the resources to survive for a seemingly indefinite period of time, such that even the task of waiting becomes precarious and stressful.

As evidence, lack of foundational rights and citizenship permeates the development of language and cultural knowledge as well as perceptions of safety and stability. It means that refugees have limited control in improving these facilitators.

### 4.3 *Social connections*

Social connection, in contrast, is one theme that refugees do exercise some control over. Commonly perceived as “the defining feature of an integrated community” (Ager & Strang 2008, 177), social connection has been described as a connective tissue between the themes of foundation and markers and means. Although the foundation is absent for the Cisarua refugees, social connection has enabled them to fill some of the gaps in markers and means with unprecedented proactivity.

#### 4.3.1 *Social bridges*

Social bridges refer to the relationships between refugees and other groups, namely, the host community. Survey data supports a distinction between superficial social contact, manifested in feelings of friendliness, and more intensive involvement with local people, such as through mutual participation in community activities. The friendliness of people encountered on a daily basis is an important factor in refugee’s feelings of being ‘at home’, with small acts of friendship having disproportionate impact on perceptions of locals. More intensive involvement in the local community,

though less associated with refugees' judgements about quality of life, may be crucial for facilitating long-term social and economic outcomes (*Ibid.*, 180).

The refugees in Cisarua are lack of sustained and widespread connection with locals. Good neighbour relations are generally reported, and some even have close Indonesian friends, but there is no regular mixing to holistically improve understandings and relationships. On the one hand, refugees have expressed surprise at the common ignorance of locals about their very existence in the area. There is an enduring misconception conflating refugees with Arab tourists, with the assumption that the formers are wealthy and here out of choice. Recent media attention surrounding the learning centres has helped combat this perception (see Hidayat 2015), but misinformation persists.

On the other hand, refugees themselves tend not to forge social bridges for several reasons. Externally, their lack of legal status and the language barrier results in very little shared participation in local schools, workplaces and clubs. This limits incidental mixing. Moreover, there is enough social activity and familiarity within the refugee community to not have to look beyond it. Internally, many refugees are keenly aware of their difference and retain a lingering reluctance to draw attention to themselves. They have reported discrimination as Indonesians are perceived to always side with other Indonesians in a dispute. Overall, the refugees agree on the general friendliness of locals, but deeper integration is absent.

In contrast, the refugee community enjoys much greater interaction with other visitors: journalists, researchers and NGOs both from Indonesia and abroad. This is because visitors tend to be motivated by an interest in either raising awareness about refugees or assisting them directly, presenting a clearly win-win arrangement. While not all refugees are willing or able to speak to outsiders, those who do maintain a view that spreading the word is their duty, in order to improve circumstances for either themselves or other refugees.

#### 4.3.2 *Social bonds*

Social bonds refer to connections with members of the same group—that is, close friends and family. These connections are especially valuable for refugees because they enable the sharing of cultural practices and familiar relationships in otherwise intimidating new environments. Various research supports the notion that connection with like-ethnic groups has benefits for integration overall (see Hale 2000; Duke *et. al.* 1999).

By virtue of sharing common culture and experiences, the Hazara refugee community in Cisarua is tight-knit. Regular social contact includes dining or playing football together. Over the past few years, the refugees have developed five learning centres, with two more being run by the Jesuit Refugee Service. These have transformed into lively social hubs, bringing refugees closer together and making them active and engaged in their own community. The learning centres have been valuable due to their essentially philanthropic purpose: the shared vision of providing refugee children with an education. It has built profound trust within the community, the backbone of the various self-help activities being carried out to this day. It is thus a notable instance of refugees demonstrating their capacity as agents, rather than passive victims or recipients of aid.

The social bonds between Cisarua's refugees are also unique because they involve an atypical community composition of family units and young, single males. Lack of access to work and education mean that volunteering and improvisation are the order of the day. This has led to the makeshift filling of social roles, for instance the recruitment of young people as teachers and managers within the learning centres. This drives a can-do and self-help attitude towards the learning centres' ongoing maintenance.

### 4.3.3 *Social links*

Social links are the connections between individuals and state institutions, such as government services. It is recognised that refugees' circumstances mean they have greater needs in order to achieve equality of access to services (Ager & Strang 2008, 181), with particular barriers including language and unfamiliarity with local policies.

Since Indonesia is a non-signatory to the Refugee Convention, the main institutions refugees in Indonesia access are UNHCR, IOM and various NGOs such as the Jesuit Refugee Service. Demand far exceeds available resources and, of course, places for resettlement. Combined with the bureaucratic difficulties of the resettlement process, refugees in Cisarua have expressed frustration with the agency mandated to protect them. While Indonesian services, such as for health and education, are nominally available, in practice their uptake is limited by the language barrier, cost, and administrative difficulties associated with refugee documentation.

Some NGOs have reached out and provided the refugee community with valuable assistance. For instance, NGO Same Skies is dedicated to building capacity in refugee transit communities. It has helped the Cisarua community to establish two learning centres and continues to provide coaching support (Same Skies 2017). Overall, transit life is marked by an absence of an institutional safety net and limited social links.

## 4.4 *Markers and means*

The single uplift of social bonds has had ripple effects across the public outcomes—that is, the visible markers—of integration. These are core areas of participation in the life of communities, showing evidence of achievements that are valued in the community. But in addition, they serve as means to support the wider integration process (Ager & Strang 2004, 13).

### 4.4.1 *Employment*

Employment is perhaps the most widely researched domain of integration due to its contribution to a host of positive outcomes, allowing refugees to “find a place in the new society” (Ager & Strang 171). Refugees are often underemployed as their skills and qualifications are not recognised in the new country. Employment therefore goes hand-in-hand with education to the extent that it improves refugee employability.

Lack of work rights is one of the leading causes of difficulty for Cisarua's refugees. The impacts are manifold, affecting refugees' economic independence, ability to plan for the future, opportunities to meet members of the host society and develop language skills, self-esteem, and self-reliance (*Ibid.* 171). Cisarua's refugees must depend on savings and support from family and friends. In practice, some refugees make very small sums of money from selling goods within the refugee community (Ali *et. al.* 2016, 4). Financial vulnerability also raises the attractiveness of illegal work (Detik News 2016), as well as driving many to extreme options such as repatriation, ‘jumping on boats’ or turning themselves into Indonesia's detention centres.

In this regard, Cisarua's learning centres have provided a rare avenue for not only maintaining, but developing skills. Running the centres demand not only volunteer teachers, but also managers, bookkeepers, IT personnel, and communications and outreach officers. Further self-help activities (see figure 3) involve skills such as sewing or sports coaching. Many of these roles are occupied by young people. While this enables them to take up responsibilities beyond the usual for their age, it also reflects the improvisation and limited resources of the learning centres.

Despite these innovations, refugee status still puts careers and aspirations on hold. For the host society, refugees' lack of work rights is a waste of human capital: not only they usually require external assistance to survive, but this burden is not exchanged for a societal contribution in the form of productive activity.



**Figure 3 Beyond the Fabric, a refugee fashion initiative in Cisarua**

Source: author, taken 16 September 2017

#### 4.4.2 Housing

Housing has a well-documented influence on refugees' overall wellbeing as well as their ability to feel 'at home'. According to Ager and Strang, the physical size and quality of accommodation was less important than "the social and cultural aspects of housing... the continuity of relationships associated with being 'settled' in an area over time" (Ager & Strang 2008, 171).

The refugees in Cisarua rent accommodation from local Indonesians. As a holiday destination, Cisarua is filled with villas and this has contributed to misconceptions about refugees being tantamount to tourists. Moreover, refugees are often willing to pay for accommodation that is unaffordable for some Indonesians, pricing them out of the area (pers. comm. with refugee, 27 October 2017). In reality, refugees need to live in proximity to Jakarta, where the UNHCR office is located, and Bogor has a lower cost of living. Travel restrictions, imposed to deter people-smuggling, limit opportunities to settle elsewhere. Refugees frequently experience overcrowding (Ali *et. al.* 2016, 2), while those in detention centres face "appalling" conditions, with poor sanitation and health, and mistreatment by authorities (HRW 2013; Hawley 2017).

While refugees in Cisarua eventually experience familiarity and routine, lack of rights means that "this is a house, not a home" (pers. comm. with refugee, 27 October 2017). This feeling is a consequence of having to continuously make do outside of regular avenues in all aspects of life.

Without enjoying a sense of agency and being free from constant legal and bureaucratic boundaries, it is impossible to shake the feeling of ‘limbo’ associated with life in transit. The community built around the learning centres is thus valuable as a support network, from finding friendly housemates to enabling an informal safety net for difficult periods.

#### 4.4.3 Education

Education, the most obvious outcome of the learning centres, leads to many forms of empowerment. It nurtures skills and competences for meaningful employment and social participation; it serves as a point of contact with members of society, establishing relationships for integration. Conversely, a lack of learning support constrains the potential of education to support integration (Ager & Strang 2008, 172).

While Indonesia allows refugee children to enrol in public schools, only 81 school-age children did so in 2016 across the entire country (UNHCR 2016, 3). There are three main barriers to entry: lack of administrative recognition, the language barrier and costs of school supplies and transport (APRRN 2015, 2). Perceptions of Cisarua as a temporary transit point add to the reluctance of refugees to seek entry (Ali *et. al.* 2016, 4). As refugee-oriented learning centres strive ahead, new arrivals tend to discover them quickly and seek a place there, rather than confronting the hurdles of local school enrolment.

These centres have become lively social hubs within the refugee community, leading to valuable outcomes in building skills, community trust and self-empowerment (see figure). It has enabled the refugees to forge connections with visitors from Australia and around the world. The learning centres teach in English, capturing the depth of aspirations to reach a third country of resettlement. Thus, the benefits described by Ager and Strang are indeed playing out amongst the refugee community. However, support and involvement of Indonesians is limited, reinforcing the separation of refugees from the local community. Furthermore, all learning centres are at capacity with long waiting lists. Dozens of children are missing out on even informal education during a critical stage of development.

Opportunities for higher education have similar challenges to enrolling in local schools. Even those with good Indonesian fluency would be hard-pressed to study in that language at a tertiary-level. Moreover, attending university is an expensive privilege even for Indonesians. This year, UNHCR delivered a joint initiative with online learning platform Coursera, allowing refugees to study for free. Many refugees have taken advantage of this opportunity. While it has been received positively, it requires a laptop, internet connection and English fluency, meaning it remains inaccessible for many.

**Figure 4 Classroom in Refugee Learning Centre**

Source: author, taken 16 September 2017



#### 4.4.4 Health

Health is a basic attribute for active participation in a new society. The level of access to healthcare is also a good indicator of effective institutional engagement. Mainstreaming—that is, having refugees and locals share the same services—is seen to be beneficial for all parties (Ager & Strang 2008, 172).

As with local education, barriers to accessing hospitals include language, cost, and lack of recognition of refugee documentation. Healthcare can be unaffordable for ordinary Indonesians, let alone refugees, for whom UNHCR and NGOs can only provide limited assistance (APRRN 2015, 2). Cheap local clinics can resolve minor medical issues, but have been described as unsophisticated (pers. comm. with refugee, 27 October 2017). This has led to “creative” methods of treatment in Cisarua; for instance, refugees with health qualifications may provide diagnoses for non-serious cases (Ali *et. al.* 2016, 4). The community-building initiatives taking place are also “inoculating against the precarious nature and mental health problems common to transitory life” (Fiske 2017).

## 5. Recommendations

A glance at the results shows that, in spite of poor initial conditions, the refugees in Cisarua have attained the markers and means of integration to some extent. Through self-reliance, they have made achievements in the domains of employment and education where Indonesian law implies there would have been none or very little. In this process, social bonds have proven to be an invaluable resource. However, isolation from local Indonesians persists. The positive outcomes stem from activities within refugee circles, with some external support. There is thus untapped potential to build social bridges in ways that contribute to the other domains of integration. The Cisarua case shows that, if allowed to live in community, refugees—even with all other rights denied—can demonstrate remarkable creative energy in improving their situation. The possibilities only broaden further with local connections and support.

Therefore, there is considerable scope to tackle the challenges of transience through initiatives that jointly benefit refugees and locals. These would promote mutual interactions and facilitate local understanding of the refugee situation. UNCHR has identified two factors of best practice (2005, para 28). The first is a community development mindset: refugees should be involved in identifying their priority needs, and in formulating measures for integration. The second is sensitivity to age and gender: specific individuals and groups, such as women, unaccompanied and separated children, female-headed households and older refugees may require particularised strategies. This participatory and context-conscious approach should also apply to the local population.

For refugees, isolation and local misconceptions are reinforced by lack of sustained and meaningful interaction with the host community. Building social bridges with Indonesians could thus vastly improve feelings of belonging, even if foundational rights and citizenship are denied. This would have flow-on effects for other domains, in particular, enhancing language and cultural knowledge, and improving social links with non-government service providers. It could also enhance access to informal employment and education opportunities to the extent that they enable refugees to develop and practise work-related skills.

Locals may resist integration due to security and economic burden concerns as well as attitudes about the impermanence of the refugees' stay (Jacobsen 2001, 11-18). Assistance that overtly and disproportionately benefits refugees can generate resentment and exacerbate differences, especially in Indonesia where poverty is still prevalent. Consequently, integration initiatives should be oriented to benefit both groups. To this end, since UHCR has a dedicated refugee-oriented mandate, NGOs, community services and development-oriented organisations have a potential coordinating role (Dick 2003, 21-2). Government stakeholders such as the Ministry of Social Affairs and Bogor Regency's social agency may also participate. By bringing value to locals, win-win initiatives may act as a proof-of-concept, encouraging Indonesian authorities to view refugees more favourably and offer greater integration support.

The nature of these initiatives should depend on the identification of shared priorities. As the case of the learning centres shows, the refugees' desire to provide their children with an education acted as a rallying point for unprecedented self-help and community-building. Thus, efforts can be made to discern shared goals in the refugee community that are compatible with the needs of the local Cisarua community. Examples include cooperative health services or cultural exchanges and reciprocal language learning.

Thus, plenty of work remains. There is a need to investigate the perspectives of both the local Indonesian community and institutions such as UNHCR and NGOs. Next, community consultations could be held to generate location-specific ideas for desirable initiatives. At a policy level, this paper adds to the literature on refugee integration where resources provided by the host society are extremely limited. It shows that fostering self-reliance and community bonds are both economically sound and less detrimental to the humans at the centre of the crisis.

## **6. Conclusion**

Ager and Strang posit a ten-domain framework for successful integration, based on themes of foundation, facilitators, social connections, and markers and means. However, their analysis is premised on the assumption of permanent resettlement. For refugees in transit, lack of support from host societies renders many of these domains impossible to attain. In Indonesia, for example, denial of rights and citizenship severely curtails achievement of social bridges, social links, employment and education, and in general leads to a life of limbo and uncertainty.

Through tight social bonds and a shared goal of educating their children, the refugee community in Cisarua, Bogor has either improved or maintained conditions in all domains. This is a prime example

of refugees being not passive recipients of assistance, but agents and architects of their own lives. Their community-building accomplishments indicate the potential of refugees to be assets rather than burdens to host societies, even those in transit. Thus, there is untapped potential to use local integration to jointly improve the lives of both refugees and their host community. More fundamentally, refugee policy needs to start taking into account the human and social capital within refugee communities to enable protracted integration process to elapse as humanely and productively as possible.

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