



Promoting Safety of Life at Sea in Selected Coastal Areas in South-East Asia through Local Actors

Establishing the Andaman Sea Response Network 2021:

Experiences, good practices, lessons learned, and recommendations

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Foreword

For over a decade we have witnessed the failure of states and regional institutions to prevent deaths at sea. Time and again men, women and children of the Rohingya community attempt to take arduous journeys on boats only to be pushed back, abandoned, and trapped at sea. Many lives have been lost. When international obligations are ignored by states it is the local men and women, communities and civil society initiatives that have, on multiple occasions, saved lives doing the right thing against all odds by engaging in rescue, facilitating disembarkation and providing support. This brief summary aims to capture some of these experiences, good practices, and lessons learned to inform further efforts by and in support of local actors and bringing them into existing networks, to enhance protection at sea for vulnerable refugees.

The status quo in the region is that many countries are unable and unwilling to protect some members of their populations, like the Rohingya. Further, neighboring states show no or little commitment to refugee protection, increasingly limiting pathways to refuge, leading to men, women and children engaging in ever more dangerous boat journeys. Rohingya continue attempts to journey across the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. Local actors have been instrumental in rescue at sea and reception. Driven by people-to-people solidarity, traditional codes, and humanitarian values, local actors have come together and found ways to save lives.

In a series of national roundtables, APRRN invited some key local actors to share and reflect on their practices, challenges, and lessons learned. The findings were brought to a regional roundtable discussion with representatives from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Bangladesh who further explored how to continue the dialogue and collaboration nationally and regionally.

We envision that follow-up on this dialogue and collaboration can inform local actors throughout the region and lead to better inclusive practices, coordination, and preparedness between local communities, NGOs, and authorities at the local and national level. Regionally, we hope the process continues and collaboration can build towards sustaining this Andaman Sea Response Network (ASRN).

In the following pages readers will learn about how the action of local communities and civil society works in complementarity with the responses of states, meager or reluctant as they sometimes are; and may also encourage states to take more humanitarian courses of action. The recent arrival of Rohingya refugees in Aceh in December 2021 is a useful demonstration of how advocacy in favor of disembarkation by civil society and local communities helps the government make the right decision. We hope that the examples captured in this paper will inspire further reflection and action towards people-to-people solidarity, acting on traditional norms and human values, and that this will, in turn, create a landscape—political and otherwise—in which states employ timely and sufficient humanitarian interventions.

At the very least, this paper provides witness to people throughout the region acting upon their values and conviction to help and save lives of those ignored and excluded, providing us all with inspiration and hope.

Background

Why do the Rohingya want to leave?

Rohingya men, women and children are stateless with no country affording them legal status. They suffer persecution in Myanmar, and experience restrictions on livelihoods and education in exile in Bangladesh. These dire situations are the key reasons why many choose to leave.

Other motivations to depart include: to reunify with families especially for women with children, opportunities for economic support for families back in Bangladesh or Myanmar, and recently an increase in migration of young women for arranged marriages.

A sad history, bound to repeat itself?

2006-11: More than 400 people died at sea after Thailand intercepted people travelling by boat, only to set them adrift in small unseaworthy boats again.

2011-2015: Large fishing and cargo boats with 200-1000 people on board, with 10-15 percent being women, leave Bangladesh and Myanmar via Thailand and are forcefully kept in jungle camps near the border when relatives failed to pay ransom. Refugees were mistreated and abused by smugglers, many died.

After this, countries closed their borders and pushed boats back out to sea leaving many trapped. Smugglers abandoned boats and passengers at sea. Initial rescue and disembarkation occurred through local fishermen.

In **2018 and 2020**, departures restarted. Two out of three passengers were women and children. Risks of abuse increased. Smugglers demanded that families pay ransoms for their relatives to disembark; combined with States preventing boats from landing, this led to boats spending up to six months at sea, with fatal consequences. More than 200 people died at sea in 2020. Once a Rohingya is on board they are under complete control of the crew. Beatings and rape are common, lack of food and illness leads to many deaths at sea.

One refugee remembers his journey in 2015

We were taken to a bigger ship in international waters, with more than 1000 people. After a long time, the crew wanted to abandon the ship, throwing food and drinking water overboard. When one person questioned the crew, they shot him. Everyone was silent and scared, feeling when one speaks up, they would open fire. We didn't know where we were, we were out of food, somewhere.

We were rescued by fishermen, first they observed the boat and returned to Indonesia. Indonesian authorities came in the morning, promised to rescue us but then later took the boat elsewhere and abandoned us again in the middle of the sea. Two days later we met the Malaysian navy, that was when we realised the Indonesian authorities were sending us to Malaysia. They said they had been looking for us, and then pulled our boat back towards Indonesia. We were left with no food and our boat was slowly sinking, no food and people became crazy. Finally Indonesian fishermen rescued us and brought us to Indonesia.

Risks during the journey

- *Condition of the vessel:* small boats are more dangerous, often lacking navigation equipment. Boats are lost after push backs.
- *Condition on the vessel:* lack of food and drinking water. Survivors indicated boats had to send supplies all the way from Myanmar as locals were fearful of bringing supplies from nearby countries due to the fear of authorities.
- *Abuses on boat by crew and smugglers:* Large numbers of women reported sexual assault and rape. Smugglers select refugee women to be victims of sexual and gender-based violence at the hands of crew members. Beatings and killings are used to instill fear and suppress protests.
- *Post disembarkation extortion of relatives:* The earlier on-land camps have now become offshore camps on the boats themselves. When family cannot pay ransoms (additional sums of money to smugglers), refugees become vulnerable to forced marriage, exploitation, and forced labour.

Good Practices

The following section introduces good practices shared by participants during the National Roundtables on Protection at Sea organised by APRRN in Indonesia on 8 October, Malaysia on 19 October, Thailand on 20 October, Bangladesh on 2 November, and during a Regional Roundtable held on 2 December 2021.

RESCUE AT SEA

(1) Aceh, Indonesia, Guardians of Life at Sea:

Indonesia:

- In Aceh, traditional law and local custom require fishermen to rescue without discrimination those who are in distress at sea.

Fishermen of Aceh in Indonesia follow the local traditional norms of their ancestors, including the obligation to rescue anyone in distress at sea. The obligation to rescue is followed without discrimination.

“Every time there is a boat or an incident at sea, there is a code, if a signal is given by taking down or lowering the flag, we are obliged by our traditional law to help, without considering religion, race or any other aspect. This is the core principle.”

“... There is no category in our traditional norms of a person we would not help.”

Local fishermen are aware of the importance of a quick response by the closest vessel given the dangers posed to a vessel in distress. Their tradition to ‘rescue first and ask questions later’ has saved lives over generations and has rescued hundreds of refugees at sea. When state authorities hesitate or try to escape responsibility to rescue, fishermen are first to respond. This tradition dates back centuries to the early kingdoms. Rescue is seen as both a moral obligation and a practice to ensure everyone contributes to safeguarding survival at sea.

Fishing commanders as the guardians of these traditions and local wisdom are respected in their community enabling quick mobilization and support. Being the key point of decision making and communication with boats at sea and the local community they play a central role in mobilizing help and, potentially, in communicating with the authorities. So far these guardians of traditional norms, values and the respect within the local communities have been strong enough to overcome pressures by the authorities to deny help to foreigners in distress at sea. In recent years fishermen had boats confiscated or even faced prosecution for their efforts to save lives at sea. Seeing their traditional norms and values challenged, fishermen seek to engage with local, national, and international institutions to preserve these lifesaving practices and strengthen capacities to stay in contact with people at sea and coordinate responses to incidents.

During the ASRN roundtables, it became clear that many fishermen were not aware that the ‘duty to rescue’ is also provided in international norms, like 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention). Roundtable presentations and shared materials on the subject were received with keen interest by local

actors to learn about international obligations and to explore how these relate to national context and could inform communications and engagement with authorities. Local actors expressed it is important to highlight that states refusing or discouraging rescue at sea are not only violating local traditional norms but also obligations under international law.

(2) State authorities taking their mandate of search and rescue seriously:

All countries:

- Article 98 of the [UN Convention on the Law of the Sea](#) states that every State shall require vessels flying its flag to render assistance to any person found at sea in danger of being lost. It is considered international customary law and applies to all countries.

What is included in the 'duty to rescue'?

Assigned to the shipmaster and states to direct ships under its flag to render assistance and rescue anyone in distress irrespective of legal status or nationality. This is not limited to territorial waters, or specific persons. There can be no discrimination in rescue.

A second obligation calls for states to engage in coordination and cooperation arrangements internally or with neighbors to ensure coordinated rescue efforts and communication. States are also responsible for spotting search and rescue regions and assigning responsibility for different regions of the sea. As such, no area of the high sea is without an obligation on a state to rescue.

What is a 'situation of distress'?

Any situation with a reasonable risk of grave and imminent danger and need of immediate assistance defines distress, including violence and health emergencies. It applies to both a person or vessel in such a situation. Challenges exist in assessing the application of the definition in refugee journeys, as it is often difficult to get first-hand information from actors on board. In refugee journeys the shipmaster or crew, due to fear of arrest, are unlikely to call for help from authorities. Interpreting distress should consider the state of the vessel, its seaworthiness, but also the situation on the board and competence of the crew. Identifying a place of safety is the next step for states or shipmasters. Ensuring immediate assistance is followed by taking refugees to a place of safety which cannot include the country of origin.

Bangladesh:

- Search is used as a way of preventing embarkation in Bangladesh.
- Bangladesh stands out as a good practice for rescue of boats in distress.

Search comes into the picture in three scenarios within the Bangladesh context:

- Vessel in distress before reaching high seas,

- Boats returning after failed disembarkation in other countries, and
- Rescue for those attempting to flee the island of Bhasan Char.

Bangladesh Maritime Authority actively monitors boats in distress. Bangladesh has not refused entry to boat arrivals and has provided COVID-19 screening and quarantine facilities. Bangladesh does not detain survivors of dangerous sea journeys in detention facilities (besides those suspected of smuggling) and has created a positive rescue response mechanism.

(3) Protection Framework, Local Traditions and Values

Indonesia:

- The 2016 Presidential Regulation No.125 determines governmental agencies' response to new arrivals of refugees and migrants by sea, specifying coordination arrangements with UNHCR, IOM and local authorities.
- The Indonesian Search and Rescue Agency has also developed operational procedures to ensure coordinated rescue at sea and disembarkation of refugees and migrants in distress at sea.

[Presidential Regulation Concerning the Handling of Foreign Refugees, No. 125](#), is one example of a national protection framework acknowledging the special situation of refugees and providing a mandate for national authorities to rescue refugees at sea as well as guide other interventions. It entered into force in 2016 after the Andaman Sea crisis. The regulation mandates the National Search and Rescue Agency, BASARNAS, to take the lead in search and rescue operations, coordinating between Indonesian Armed Forces, Police and the Maritime Security Agency during 'the finding of refugees in emergency situations in Indonesian waters' (article 5) or who 'transmit distress calls' (article 6). If a 'carrying boat is about to go under' the refugees must be transferred to a rescue vessel and taken to the nearest port if their lives are in danger.

Local fishermen and CSOs recently provided consolidated feedback to the government on the five-year-old presidential regulation including recommending a more explicit mandate for fishing and local communities to actively engage in rescue efforts as well as clearer communication channels to appropriate authorities. At the date of publication of this paper, CSOs and fishing associations were still awaiting a response from the government on this recommendation.

Malaysia:

- Local actors find inspiration and confirmation for humanitarian action in religious teachings and use these as a reference and guide during engagement with authorities and the wider community. During the ASRN roundtables, actors in Malaysia highlighted Islamic principles of humanitarianism and fraternity, and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad towards the obligation to provide protection to those fleeing persecution. It includes the religious obligation to save lives and provide refuge to persons in need of protection, and guides ways to promote greater social cohesion between refugees and host communities in the spirit of unity in diversity. This has been particularly important when countering recent xenophobic trends via building wider coalitions beyond traditional humanitarian and human rights actors.

Some Islamic references inspiring Malaysian's humanitarian spirit and action include:

- The Quranic verse 49:13 underscores the equality of all human beings in the eyes of Allah, the importance of pluralism, and the Islamic obligation to eradicate prejudices based on race, colour, language, nationality, or other differences of identity. An example of this during Muhammad's time was the of Bilal ibn Rabah, who was from Habasha (present day Ethiopia) and born to slave parents, and yet was one of the most trusted Sahabah (companions). Most of the world's refugees are Muslims, and that they are facing a similar situation to what was faced by the Sahabah when they were forced to leave Mecca to Medina and become '*muhajirin*' (refugee). Reflecting on how refugees relate to their host community in Medina, prophet Muhammad said that all believers are part of the same body, if one part of the body gets sick or tired, the whole body will suffer from fever and exhaustion.
- The life of Prophet Muhammad teaches Muslims *Islam rahmatan lil alamin* (Islam as mercy to all creation), namely, to understand and interpret the Holy Quran and Hadith for the good of all humanity and all creation.
- Surah Al Hujurat, Verse 13 of the Quran: *Inna akramakum 'indallahi atqakum inna Allaha 'alimun khabeerun* (Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is he who is the most righteous of you), which declares virtue and piety as among the highest values that a person can possess in the eyes of Allah.

(4) Refugee Champions

Indonesia:

- In Aceh, the local fishermen's association is committed to rescuing without discrimination those in distress at sea. The association is seen as a guardian of traditional norms by the local people.
- Many Acehese people remember being displaced by armed conflict and are able to empathize with the plight of Rohingya refugees.

Strong local institutions and traditional commitment to rescue at sea are part of centuries old norms practiced in Aceh. Respect for traditional institutions *adat laut* and their guardians the *panglima laut* within the community enables quick decisions to rescue. Traditional community consultation processes on issues allow decisions as a community including to provide support to people in vulnerable situations, like refugees in distress at sea or after disembarkation.

Strong (informal) networks of key local actors enable information sharing and validation; fishermen and the community mobilize quick ad-hoc support during emergencies. They also Link to national networks to encourage key decision makers to intervene on behalf of humanitarian rescue efforts. In 2015, advocacy by local actors with authorities helped ensure the fishing boat used during rescue and consequently held by the police was returned to the fishermen.

Empathy, solidarity, and welcome expressed within the communities in Aceh is based on shared lived experience of displacement. Many Acehese had to flee during conflict times and found refuge in neighboring and third countries. Many chose to return after a peace agreement was signed, many holding

important positions now in Aceh. The experience of living as conflict IDPs is common in Aceh, some activists and leaders became refugees, therefore most can empathize with the situation and fate of Rohingya men, women and children.

The roundtable discussion in Aceh also pointed towards exploring what potential refugees have for the future of their community, country, and humanity. It touched on how refugees can become actors of change if provided safety and opportunities, e.g. inclusion and education.

DISEMBARKATION

(1) Favorable Protection Framework

Bangladesh:

- The 2016 Coast Guard Act states that a person rescued or intercepted at sea will be disembarked at the nearest port.
- The 2016 Coast Guard Act requires the coastguard to collaborate with the police to check the criminal record of intercepted persons before they are allowed to resume their normal life.

(2) Preparedness for Arrivals

Indonesia:

- In anticipation of boat arrivals, government authorities, local and national humanitarian organizations and international actors came together as a whole of society to prepare for disembarkation. This was effectively done despite COVID-19, when many states were pushing back boats and prohibiting any disembarkation with explicit reference to the pandemic. Aceh's preparedness especially during these times is pertinent to note. Early planning, preparedness and coordination are key steps to manage arrivals well, during any circumstances.
- Local CSOs partner with other humanitarian actors advocating for a provincial task force and a regulation that would secure funding for a more permanent shelter allowing to move beyond ad hoc solutions on district level.

POST-DISEMBARKATION RESPONSE

(1) Immediate Assistance and Response

Thailand:

- In Phang-nga province, some local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the provincial authorities to participate in multidisciplinary anti-trafficking committees. In coordination with other committee members, CSOs provide immediate assistance (food, hygiene items and medicine), participate in joint screening of vulnerabilities and refer vulnerable people to specialised services.
- In 2015, some local CSOs adopted a three-year budget to ensure predictability in their assistance for refugees who disembarked in Thailand.
- Some Rohingya children were able to attend local schools after local CSOs provided Thai literacy training.

The major role assumed by CSOs in Thailand is in providing post-disembarkation support. From the first day Rohingya refugees are brought to a shelter by the authorities, CSOs reach out to them to provide basic needs support, particularly food, water, and clothes. Local CSOs have been networking with one another and cooperated well with the authorities. In the past, they were occasionally allowed to be involved in the screening of trafficking victims together within a multi-disciplinary team of government agencies. When the Provincial multidisciplinary anti-trafficking committee was established, local CSOs joined and signed an MOU with the provincial authorities to ensure their engagement and continued support. Having established trust and regular communication, the CSOs receive up-to-date information and are able to respond in a timely manner.

Local CSOs have incorporated Rohingya assistance into their regular mandate and some prepared a three-year budget to continue their support in terms of basic needs to Rohingya and the shelter where they stay. Faith Based Organizations enhance mental health by facilitating religious practice at local mosques and facilitating encounters with local people through joint sport activities. In terms of education, an existing learning center run by CSOs provided the opportunity for Rohingya children to learn Thai language and culture, preparing them for further education in local Thai schools. The CSOs have established good relations with local schools in addition to their education project, hence, access for Rohingya students to these schools was achieved.

Bangladesh:

- The Anti-Trafficking Committee in coastal areas works with local actors. Government engages with locals under the trafficking framework. Police encourage locals to rescue those at risk of trafficking, including stopping people from embarking on boats.
- In April 2020, following the disembarkation of a refugee vessel near Cox's Bazar, UN agencies and CSOs coordinated their response in support of the authorities to assist the survivors. Quarantine centers were established, and specialised services were provided.

The protection and assistance for trafficking victims is covered under the National Plan of Action 2018-2022 and the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act 2012. Counter trafficking committees are formulated under the same. The 2012 Act contains various provisions which enable special protection for women and children. Child survivors are to be dealt with in a child-friendly way by trained officers. While this Act applies to citizens and non-citizens, including Rohingya in the territory of Bangladesh, anti-trafficking cases filed by Rohingya were not accepted by the High-court in the past. The Act also established special tribunals which focus on timely trials for trafficking cases, but to date, no conviction as a result of these tribunals in relation to Rohingya being trafficked from camps is known.

Other protections related to trafficking and related rights violations include forced labour and forced prostitution. The Overseas Migration and Employment Act also protects the workforce which includes refugees.

Most refugees leaving Bangladesh on boat journeys. Self-motivated movements include women going for marriage purposes and men moving away due to the substantial lack of livelihood and cash for work activities in the camps. The recruiters and brokers are well established in the camps, and can easily mislead, misinform, and influence vulnerable refugees.

For those rescued at sea by Bangladeshi authorities, the police will generally file a case under human trafficking laws as there is no specific law for those rescued at sea. While not all are victims of trafficking, they still may be at risk of trafficking or exploitation post disembarkation. To avoid exploitation, anti-trafficking advocates encourage people to explore safe migration opportunities, creating awareness and explaining risks to Rohingya as well as host communities. However, safe options are not accessible for the stateless Rohingya population encamped in Bangladesh. While third country resettlement is the only remaining solution, it is unfortunately rarely explored or secured for this population.

Roundtable participants identified a need to advocate and realize regular migration options including increasing third country resettlement, education and temporary work abroad pathways.

Indonesia:

- In Aceh, strong community mechanisms and communication channels have built consensus about protecting those in distress as well as mobilizing resources within the community to respond quickly, for example by providing food and other items after arrival.

Aceh's strong cultural tradition of honoring guests known as '*Peumulia Jamee*' is extended to Rohingya arriving after experiencing distress or prolonged times trapped at sea. The community comes together to provide help, collecting food, clothing, and other items needed. University students collect money or resources to provide help. The local community convenes in meetings to make decisions in regard to 'guests'. These community mechanisms are relied upon commonly during the days after immediate arrival or disembarkation, when authorities or humanitarian actors have not yet mobilised.

(2) Local Support Mechanisms**Thailand:**

- In coastal provinces such as Songkhla and Phang-nga, local CSOs can mobilize resources and expertise for immediate assistance and advocacy.
- Good practices in Songkhla and Phang-nga provinces have demonstrated that engaging and building trust with local authorities with decision-making power can make a real difference at the field-level for the assistance and protection of refugees, despite a constraining national policy framework.
- Working and coordinating with different stakeholders helps strengthen the protection activities for people in need.

Local CSOs have close collaboration among themselves and aim to provide humanitarian assistance to the Rohingya. Information sharing from their network both from Myanmar and in Thailand regarding the movement of Rohingya enables them to prepare both human and financial resources as well as logistics to respond to the situation effectively.

Local CSOs have collaborated not only among themselves but have also connected to the provincial level to reinforce responses. For example, the local administration in Songkla Province was able to provide medical care to Rohingya free of charge because they could receive reimbursement from the Provincial Public Health Office, while Phang-nga government shelter took further steps beyond their regular responsibility to provide high-quality care to the Rohingya who were trafficking victims.

Not only were there CSOs providing humanitarian assistance to Rohingya at the local level, there were other CSOs working on advocacy by issuing statements, monitoring the protection situation, engaging in dialogue with government officials, submitting reports in accordance with UN international human rights mechanisms, and reaching out to embassies and international organisations.

Some Rohingya have been detained at Immigration Detention Centers across the county. Resulting from long term trust building with the immigration authority, CSOs have been granted permission to visit Rohingya and provided them *halal* food. By including Rohingya response into their mandate and

programs, humanitarian CSOs and Faith Based Organisations can extend relationships and coordination established with authorities towards ensuring Rohingya inclusion into government services.

Malaysia:

- The current humanitarian framework used by Malaysia is insufficient to comprehensively address the needs and protection concerns faced by refugees and asylum seekers in the country. The All-Party Parliamentary Group Malaysia (APPGM) provided a forum to engage members of Parliament towards the development of a policy and legal framework for refugee protection in Malaysia. It is composed of members from different political parties, NGOs, religious bodies and other relevant actors.
- Since its formation, the APPGM has actively engaged with the refugee communities, carried out discussions to inform policy on refugees in the country, shape political will and introduced refugee communities and their situation to parliamentarians.
- The APPGM has conducted several consultations with refugee representatives in Parliament discussing issues pertaining to documentation, education, health, work rights and strengthening relations with host communities.

Lessons Learnt

- A. Throughout the region, when a government refuses or delays taking action towards protection or inclusion of refugees at sea or on land, local people, communities and institutions step in, leading by example. Political will is often created following the actions of local people and communities. Engagement with the local communities and the government leads to opportunities to act towards better protection.
- B. The status quo of individual approaches to refugee populations and rights without a multilateral agreement stymies state responses and provokes harmful and counterproductive interventions. In the absence of any realistic large-scale solutions, given there is no legal pathway for Rohingya to move towards livelihood, resettlement or integration, states are unlikely to afford meaningful protection and recognition of refugee rights. Regional leadership is required to bring together actors from within the region to speak with a unified voice, bringing these issues jointly to the international community to step up support for regional and shared solutions. Solidarity with hosting states is essential to achieve change; financial support and much increased access to resettlement are essential.
- C. Showcasing the initiatives that exist within local communities, individual countries and the region enables learning and replication of solutions that have the best impact. The persecution, exile and subsequent movement of Rohingya is a regional issue, everyone's problem, and all states in and beyond the region must make a commitment to contribute. Our region could show that by local actors, CSOs and authorities coming together we can find and realize solutions.

D. Exclusion of Rohingya from usual processes and support

Thailand:

- For the most part, CSOs were not allowed to participate in the screening of trafficking victims by the multidisciplinary team, consisting of government agencies only. Many of the participants of the roundtable called for a more inclusive screening process for trafficking victims in which CSOs could complement authorities' efforts to identify victims of trafficking. Participants expressed that many cases labeled as illegal entry cases would have benefited from a more detailed assessment by skilled humanitarian professionals. Participants felt that the low number of identified trafficking victims suggests that survivors of trafficking remained undetected and were deported to Myanmar or are currently held in indefinite detention.
- Rohingya who were arrested as illegal immigrants were deported to Myanmar, but they were not accepted by Myanmar due to not possessing household registration and identity cards. So, they were pushed back to Thailand and have been detained at the immigration detention center for several years.

E. Local actors face logistical and legal challenges

Indonesia:

- Practical challenges regarding timely communication and limited radio reach mean boats have to get close to shore to report boats in distress. Fishermen are not well equipped to conduct rescue missions. Fishermen and their families tend to have lower socio-economic status, so the emergency aid provided by them during and after rescue should be reimbursed by humanitarian actors or government.
- The arrest of fishermen, their prosecution under charges of migrant smuggling and subsequent sentence of five years imprisonment for the rescue/bringing to shore of Rohingya refugees shocked and confused many fishermen, discouraging rescue attempts in future.

F. Perception and Influencing Political will

Local actors create realities on the ground that encourage states to act. International and local media play a defining role shaping perceptions during and beyond emergencies, influencing mobilisation of resources and political support. The sharing of information and safe predictable coordination between local actors in the region strengthens their preparedness and effectiveness, ensuring roles and expectations are realistic and sustainable. Local actors acknowledge the need for support to increase knowledge and capacity providing assistance but also in advocacy with state authorities. Simple frameworks or talking points could help inform messages and engagement on the ground. More in-depth exchange of practices, messages or training on rescue and distress at sea, disembarkation, coordination, and messaging could strengthen and support the role local actors play within the local, national and regional context. Resourcing and advocating participation by local actors in national and regional forums will enable them to share their experiences, motivations and present realistic local solutions.

Recommendations

- Enhance support and capacity building of local actors through workshops while strengthening their links to national and regional actors that could provide support and access to information and resources. Offering a series of trainings including local, national, and regional actors would provide a space to link and learn.
- National and international actors should take on the role of facilitator or convener, creating spaces for discussions and exploring constructive collaboration and communication between local actors and authorities. For example, fishermen associations in Aceh, Indonesia requested APRRN to convene an introductory meeting with local police contact points to clarify communication channels in case boats in distress were identified by fishermen at sea, as communication in these cases was often ad hoc and distrust had increased after fishermen were sentenced under the immigration law in 2021.
- Continue to include local actors with opportunities to share their experiences and actions within the region making them key advocates for a regional commitment and the scaling of good practices.
- Support local actors' communication efforts on the local level by providing a framework including talking points or simple reference material that can inform their ongoing or *ad hoc* engagement with decision makers on the ground, toward more effective and persuasive messaging based on national, regional, and international norms and guidelines. NGO's, including APRRN, should continue to support local actors by sharing materials, press releases and in convening thematic discussions in which communication material and messages could be developed with the local actors.
- Strengthen collaboration and clear coordination during information-sharing and advocacy efforts, via providing a directory of contacts shared with members of the network and providing a communication channel.
- Ensure local actors have access to legal aid support if needed, through a list of engaged local legal aid providers.
- As rescue at sea is by nature a regional issue, efforts should encourage key regional platforms and institutions like ASEAN or the Bali Process to develop and implement an SOP on Rescue at Sea. This process should proactively engage with CSOs and local actors. Organizations with consultative status to the Bali Process like UNHCR or ADFM could facilitate and support this engagement. Tabletop exercises or inclusive workshops on scenarios and good practices in the region like those presented in this Summary paper should be used to encourage the SOP initiative.



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