

INEE Minimum Standards Case Study: Refugee Teacher Compensation in Malaysia

Name:	Alexandra Kaun
Position:	Associate Programme Officer
Phone:	+66 22881492
Email:	kaun@unhcr.org
Organization:	UNHCR
Location:	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (previous) / Bangkok, Thailand (current)

Background and Context

UNHCR Malaysia provides international protection and assistance to some 90,000 refugees and asylum seekers, the majority of whom reside in urban areas of Kuala Lumpur. Though 95% come from Myanmar, other countries of origin include Sri Lanka, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Malaysia has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, and refugees and asylum seekers face daily threats of arrest and detention. In addition, access to basic services such as health, education and livelihood opportunities remains a challenge.

At the end of 2010, there were around 19,000 refugee children residing in Malaysia, only 5,134 (approximately 30%) of whom were attending school. As refugee children are unable to access the public and private education system in Malaysia, UNHCR financially supports seven schools run by local NGOs. In addition, the majority of children attended 53 community-based schools, which were started and managed by refugees themselves. Prior to 2010, UNHCR's support for these schools included textbook support, teacher training, and coordination. Many schools, however, were not receiving any external support, and teachers often held two, sometimes three jobs in order to make ends meet. As teachers struggled to support themselves and their families financially, their attendance and quality of instruction were often compromised because they juggled different working schedules and did not have sufficient time to prepare their lessons.

Regular consultations with refugee teachers underlined the need to provide them with more support. Recognizing the positive community-driven efforts by the refugee community, UNHCR struggled with how best to support the teachers, while at the same time continuing to encourage the existing spirit of self-help. Through regular participatory assessments with teachers, parents, students and partners, teacher compensation was suggested as a way to address this gap. As a result, UNHCR, with the help of one of its implementing partners, rolled out teacher compensation for over 100 refugee teachers in 2010, continuing into 2011.

Application

UNHCR's refugee education policy is based on internationally-recognized education standards-namely, the INEE Minimum Standards. The policy includes emphasis on ensuring access, quality and protection in all formal and non-formal educational activities.

It is a well-known fact that without teachers, quality education would not be possible. But a teacher's ability to deliver quality education relies not only on inputs, such as proper training or materials; perhaps more fundamentally, it depends on the recognition of their efforts through adequate compensation. In a functioning state, teachers are paid through governments or private institutions. In many countries and contexts in which UNHCR operates, however, the national Ministry of Education is often unwilling to support education for refugees. As a result, UNHCR and its partners establish parallel education structures and take a lead role in ensuring that basic educational standards, as laid out by the INEE Minimum Standards, are met. Quite often, as was the case in Malaysia, UNHCR and its partners are unable to pay refugees a salary comparable to local standards, both because of the legal constraints of paying 'illegal migrants' in the country (as refugees are often seen), and due to inadequate funding.

As this was the first time that UNHCR was compensating refugee teachers in community schools in Malaysia, UNHCR had to rely on various tools for guidance including best practices from other UNHCR refugee operations. However, it was difficult to find a situation in which UNHCR paid refugee teachers directly, as opposed to engaging NGO partners to pay on UNHCR's behalf. For further guidance, UNHCR drew from INEE's Minimum Standard 4 on "Teachers and other Education Personnel" and the INEE Guidance Notes on Teacher Compensation. The Guidance Notes, in particular, were pivotal in ensuring that certain issues were considered during the planning process, including the roles of different stakeholders in compensation, coordination, monitoring systems, and various technical considerations involved with payment. This guidance helped UNHCR draft a strategy, which after consultation with stakeholders, served as a framework to roll-out teacher compensation for refugee community schools.

Challenges

As this was the first time rolling out teacher compensation for refugee community schools in Malaysia, there were many challenges that UNHCR and its partners confronted along the way.

In some schools, teachers were paid a small amount through school fees while in others, local churches and volunteers contributed towards paying teachers a small amount. UNHCR and its partners struggled with how to balance monetary compensation with continued community ownership and participation in education. Although we engaged in consistent advocacy and communication to try to address this challenge, community participation in some schools declined, thus weakening community ownership and the sustainability of the schools. In 2011, more efforts will be made to address this challenge at the level of community leaders.

Determining the criteria and scale of compensation during the planning phase was another challenge we faced. Key considerations included limited funding allocations and a desire to compensate teachers fairly. As highlighted in the INEE Guidance Notes on Teacher Compensation, payment should acknowledge a variety of factors, including qualifications, experience, and working hours. After close consultation with stakeholders, the scale was finalized, based on successful completion of teacher training (through a local partner) and/or prior formal training; hours spent working at the school; level of responsibility (higher for Head Teachers), and the teacher's educational level (secondary versus higher education).

UNHCR also struggled with the technicalities of payment. How could payments be conducted in a clear and transparent manner, without placing an additional burden on already limited staff? Fortunately, thanks to an existing relationship with a local bank, UNHCR was able to secure bank accounts for all teachers identified for compensation. This not only ensured that payments were done in a professional manner, but it also provided teachers with more financial independence and flexibility.

Once refugee teachers were compensated, it became necessary to create mechanisms to ensure accountability, including ToRs, Codes of Conduct, and monitoring tools. In addition, certain scenarios had to be planned for. For example, what if new teachers were hired after compensation began? What about those teachers who depart for resettlement? What was the contingency plan if funding was cut during the next year? And what would be the appropriate response if a teacher's attendance, teaching and behavior were found to be problematic? All of these scenarios became real issues, and discussing them beforehand enabled the team to respond more effectively.

Outcomes

Thanks to the support of UNHCR management, staff, partners and refugee teachers themselves, teacher compensation for community refugee teachers continues until today. Learning is still in progress, but a few significant lessons are noted below.

First, successful teacher compensation for refugee teachers in Malaysia depended heavily upon consultation with relevant stakeholders. Not only were partners and refugee teachers included in the planning process, but regular updates and feedback sessions were built into quarterly education coordination meetings, resulting in regular communication and feedback. In addition, this regular consultation promoted ownership of the initiative, rather than being seen as a UNHCR initiative alone. This participatory process was especially important when it came time to prevent and address challenges. Given the unique position and role of each stakeholder, everyone involved in the process made a significant contribution to ensure the success of the initiative.

Quarterly meetings with refugee Head Teachers, in addition to regular monitoring of the schools by UNHCR and its implementing partner, helped to assess the overall impact of teacher compensation. In particular, teachers noted their renewed commitment to teaching; an improved quality of instruction, and a more positive reputation of teachers within their communities. Utilizing other methods of evaluation, such as students' test scores and more qualitative research with children, would help inform this assessment even more. Despite this informal feedback, a more thorough external evaluation is recommended after one year, to better analyze the effects of the intervention.

In addition, UNHCR realized the importance of working closely with its implementing partner responsible for managing the teacher compensation. For example, the agencies worked jointly on ToRs and Codes of Conduct for the teachers, a monitoring plan for the Coordinator, and had biweekly meetings to review progress and address any issues. Such positive collaboration was only possible because of the previous strong working relationship.

Finally, rolling out such an important - and potentially controversial - project, underlined the need to make use of available tools in the planning process. INEE Guidance Notes proved invaluable during the planning stages and highlighted many issues that would have otherwise gone unnoticed, resulting in a stronger strategy. On a similar note, just as UNHCR made use of lessons from other interventions, the importance of documenting interventions was also made apparent. Not only does such documentation serve as a way to track progress and ensure institutional memory, but it also serves as a learning tool for other agencies and actors, wishing to make a similar intervention in the future.

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