

Ninth Regional Peer Learning Platform on Alternative Care Arrangements for Children in the Context of International Migration in the Asia Pacific

18-20 August 2026 | Thailand

High-Level Summary Report

Background

The Regional Peer Learning Platform was established in November 2019 in order to galvanise momentum in the Asia Pacific region to move away from the held immigration detention of children. The Platform brings together participants from policy and implementing agencies in the governments of Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, New Zealand and Thailand, as well as experts from ASEAN, civil society, international organisations and academia. The Platform has been convened by the International Detention Coalition (IDC) and the Secretariat of the Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM) since 2019. This year, we were particularly pleased to co-convene the Platform with Thailand's National Security Council (NSC), whose support and engagement helped strengthen the Platform's dialogue and regional collaboration.

The purpose of the Platform is to share promising practices and concrete examples of what is working in each country to transition away from the immigration detention of children. In addition to supporting policy development through sharing knowledge, experiences and lessons learned, the Platform also facilitates bilateral engagement on specific areas of interest and arranges site visits to learn about ATD in practice and inspire meaningful change. The Platform has contributed to positive developments across the region, including high-level political commitments to end child detention, the release of thousands of children and their families from detention into community-based alternatives or child care centres, and improved systems that prevent child detention in the first instance. [A 2024 evaluation of the Platform](#) identified four key outcomes: building collective momentum for national reform by supporting knowledge-sharing and collaboration among stakeholders; developing policy champions within and outside government who have advanced more humane and rights-based migration policies and practices; creating greater space for collaboration between government and civil society, fostering trust and joint problem-solving; and strengthening regional cooperation through peer learning and cross-country exchanges, helping align national reforms with international and regional frameworks.

The piloting and expansion of alternatives - including foster care, kinship care, and shelters - has grown, boosting confidence in the ability of non-custodial policies to achieve the legitimate government aim of resolving the migration status of non-citizens while meeting community expectations regarding the treatment of children. Each national context is unique and each country is on its own journey away from the held detention of children. No one country has a perfect system or knows all the answers. With this in mind, the Platform is based on the understanding that we can all learn a lot from each other's experiences, particularly when we share frankly and openly with each other and involve a wide range of stakeholders in the discussion.

While the meetings are centred on alternatives to detention (ATD) of children in the context of migration, discussions also explore related issues of strengthening rights-based migration management; such as managing registration and documentation, vulnerability screening, case management, access to social services and livelihoods, and combatting misinformation, disinformation and hate speech against refugees and migrants.

Over 2.5 days in Thailand, about 40 participants took part in substantive plenary discussions and also a full day of site visits. A panel discussion during dinner on the first night was also open to select guests outside of the Platform meeting. Given that discussions take place under the Chatham House Rule, what follows is a high-level summary of the meeting and next steps.

Summary of national updates

The Platform meeting kicked off on Tuesday afternoon, with a formal welcome from Mr. Patai Sidisunthorn, Assistant Secretary-General of the National Security Council of Thailand, Mr. Andrew Egan, Deputy Ambassador of Australia to Thailand, IDC and the ADFM Secretariat. Following these welcoming remarks, all five states shared national updates, highlighting any major developments since the last Platform meeting in Sydney in 2025. Following each presentation, participants had the chance to ask questions or make comparisons with their own country experience. Key emerging themes from the national updates included:

- ATD as part of holistic migration governance** - most countries referred to a suite of migration policies linked to ATD as part of their presentations, in recognition that ATD for children cannot exist without supporting policy and programmatic infrastructure such as screening and registration processes, regularisation of status for undocumented or stateless persons, access to education and healthcare, for example. These policies are in varying states of development across participating countries and the Platform discussed ways of supporting these further, alongside support to ATD for children.
- Emerging trends and challenges** - In addition to the impact of large-scale cuts to foreign aid and the global retrenchment of resettlement programmes discussed further below, other emerging trends and challenges identified during national updates included increasing presence and coordination of transnational organised crime in our region, including the Pacific, an increase in high-quality fraudulent documentation in some countries, and an increase in unaccompanied minors.
- Convention status not a prerequisite for ATD policy** - As in previous years, states emphasised their commitments to ATD for children irrespective of their accession to the Refugee Convention. Rather, ATD for children was seen as in keeping with international norms, national security priorities, and commitments under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which all Platform countries have signed.
- Community-based models are more humane, effective and also save money** - In all countries, funding for expensive policies such as detention is under significant pressure if not completely broken down. Community-based models where children live with their families or kinship groups in housing and local neighbourhoods were identified as a more cost-effective solution, and one that has been shown to result in high levels of compliance across the region. Community-based models have also evidenced better health and wellbeing outcomes for children and their families.
- Whole-of-Government and 'Whole-of-Society' approaches are essential to progress** - Across country contexts, partnerships with civil society organisations and local community groups were identified as a key factor in the success of community-based ATD models. Additionally, each country recognised the importance of coordination and collaboration across levels in Government and with external stakeholders including civil society, academics, and migrant and refugee communities, in supporting progress with policy development and implementation, addressing key gaps, and promoting inclusion outcomes with the public.
- Good ATD policy upholds national security** - All states need to prioritise their national security in addition to human security, and discussions repeatedly raised that good ATD policy, alongside good registration and protection screening mechanisms and regularisation drives, allows governments to better understand who is in their territory. Treating people humanely outside of held detention also lowers risks of severe and long-term mental health impacts, and supports coexistence with local communities.

Panel discussion

Following the opening session in the afternoon of 18 August, a welcome dinner generously hosted by UNHCR and the Thai National Security Council was held, featuring a panel discussion. Emeritus Professor of Law at Chulalongkorn University Vitit Muntarbhorn set the scene with some lively welcoming remarks. Professor Vitit is the former Special Rapporteur of the UN Commission on Human Rights on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, giving him a unique perspective on protecting the rights of the child.

Following this welcome, a panel discussion ensued which brought together Thailand's Human Rights Representative to ASEAN, a Malaysian civil society practitioner of ATD programming, and a young woman with first-hand experience of both immigration detention and an ATD programme. This is part of the organisers' commitment to incorporating the perspectives of those with lived experience of displacement and detention into the Platform, and we were privileged that this young woman felt comfortable to share her experience and expertise with us, as well as her hopes for the future.

The discussion was expertly moderated by Prof. Dr Tri Nuke Pudjiastuti from the ADFM Secretariat. Panellists reflected on progress made to date on ATD policy, both at the national and regional level, and the role of policy champions to carry forward reform. They also shared reflections on how ASEAN is trying to tackle forced migration, how governments can collaborate better with civil society, and what gives them hope for the future.

"Every child deserves to grow up in a healthy environment, where they can develop, play with freedom, study, and work toward their own goals, the same as any other child would."

Site visits: Ban Tham Hin Temporary Shelter and Sumitomo Factory

The importance of grounding our policy discussions in implementation on the ground has been emphasised in previous Platform meetings, and thus co-convenors sought to arrange an insightful site visit to learn more about recent changes in Thai policy which grant refugees' right to work and issue identity cards to 'Myanmar displaced persons'. First, participants travelled to Ban Tham Hin Temporary Shelter, which was established in 1997 and houses almost 4,500 displaced persons from Myanmar, predominantly Karen Christians. These temporary shelters were particularly affected by the international aid cuts last year, when 80% of their funding disappeared. As this temporary shelter is the most accessible from Bangkok, it is also the shelter with the highest proportion of refugees with work permits since the policy changed in August 2025. About 60% of the working-age population has been granted a work permit.

During the visit, participants heard about the latest situation in the camp, current humanitarian needs, and how the departure of 60% of the working-age adults has impacted life on the ground. Child protection needs were discussed, including how to care for children whose parents have gone to work, and how to maintain camp-based schooling if those who previously worked as teachers choose to work outside the camp. Being able to discuss these concerns directly in the camp, with a first-hand understanding of the realities facing refugees and host communities, was much more impactful than discussing them in theory in a meeting room. It also enabled participants to consider these interconnected challenges more holistically when thinking about how to develop and implement rights-based migration policies that respond to people's real needs and circumstances. We are very grateful to the Camp Commander, Camp Committee, UNHCR, and the Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT) for their generosity in helping to arrange this site visit, on top of their already busy schedules.

After leaving Ban Tham Hin, the group then travelled to Sumitomo Electrical Wiring Systems Thai factory, which has been a large employer of refugees from the camps since the policy change. At the factory, the group heard about the private sector's view on the refugees' right to work policy, the training and support available to refugees, and discussed recruiting challenges and integration processes for new refugee employees.

Summary of substantive sessions

After the full day of site visits, substantive sessions continued across a full day of roundtable and small group discussions in Kanchanaburi, by the River Kwai. Persistent themes and reflections from the substantive sessions on the third day included:

The significance of the transition the region is undergoing should not be underestimated

Major cuts to both humanitarian funding and resettlement quotas announced last year are still being felt throughout the region, and have led all governments to rethink their domestic migration policies. This impact was cited by many throughout the Platform as a key rationale for policy change, and is being envisioned as a long-term transition rather than a short-term fix. Following the visit to Ban Tham Hin, participants discussed refugee camps as being a “Cold War legacy” not fit for the present moment, and talked about ways to transition to models of refugee self-reliance through access to livelihood, education and skills training.

Policies will not succeed without a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach

It was also widely recognised that such a transition would not be possible without taking a whole-of-society and whole-of-government approach. Collaboration between government and civil society, international organisations and academia will be crucial in the successful design and implementation of ATD policy, and it was encouraging to hear about concrete examples of this collaboration taking place across the region. The importance of this is partly reflected in the composition of Platform participants, who are drawn from a wide range of relevant ministries, organisations and institutions.

Learning by doing: be solutions-focused

Participants also recognised that change doesn’t come overnight, and it will take time to get policy settings right. That should not be an impediment to starting the journey, however, and there were several examples shared where lessons have been learned and policies tweaked along the way. Again, the value of collaboration was identified here, as civil society, UN agencies and academics can be good partners in helping to evaluate policy on the go and identify where things can be improved.

Developing social cohesion and combating misinformation, disinformation and hate speech is becoming more challenging

While people used different terminology for ‘social cohesion’ including ‘social coexistence’, ‘social integration’ and ‘community cohesion’, all countries recognised it as a challenge and one with an important role for government. As one participant put it: “where we have seen things working well is where we have seen responses from governments themselves”. Countries shared their domestic models and frameworks for addressing these issues, and international and national civil society organisations offered to share resources and support these efforts. It was also recognised that working with migrant and refugee communities themselves was very important, particularly on this issue.

The value of peer learning

Despite the very different contexts in each country, participants all recognised the benefit in sharing their experience and hearing from other countries on what has worked for them. As the Platform has been meeting for seven years now, relationships built over time truly foster this “community of practice” spirit, and frequently, discussions from plenary spilled over into the sidelines, lunch breaks and after dinner.

Outcomes and next steps

As has been the case in previous years, the final session provided an opportunity for participants to shape the future of the Platform. Co-convenors had prepared three potential scenarios for the Platform’s future and participants were able to provide feedback on their preferences, what they found most useful, and what could be improved. This is a summary of what co-convenors heard from that final session, which they will consider internally while designing the forward workplan of the Platform. We invite participants to contact us if they have additional thoughts or suggestions.

Key outcomes and next steps:

- **Support to national-level processes:** Participants supported the idea that the Platform could support national-level policy developments, whether that be developing or improving ATD policies and programmes, updating nationwide refugee policy, implementing new registration policies, or addressing child protection as part of right to work policies. With organisers based in each participating country except for New Zealand, organisers are happy to facilitate national-level dialogue or share resources to support these processes.
- **Learning from others but not expanding the membership permanently:** Instead of adding a new member of the Platform, as has been posited in the past, it was suggested that new countries could be invited on a one-off basis to share their experience in future meetings. The rationale was to avoid making the meetings too big (which risks losing the spirit of camaraderie) and the challenge in finding a sixth country with a sufficiently comparable system and context. Countries with interesting models to share on a one-off basis that were raised included Japan, the Republic of Korea, and the Philippines from this region, or Canada and Colombia further afield.
- **Supporting ASEAN:** There was general agreement that the Platform could be a good vehicle to support implementation of the pending ASEAN Guidelines on ATD, once they have been adopted, including translating the Guidelines into concrete national-level priorities. This should be done while maintaining the Platform's unique format and culture, rather than transitioning the Platform into a formal ASEAN mechanism.
- **Importance of listening to children's voices:** Hearing directly from children particularly those who have experienced detention or an ATD programme is a crucial part of policy success and should be considered in the Platform's forward workplan.
- **Mixed views on an expanded mandate:** Pros and cons were raised about the possibility of explicitly expanding the mandate of the Peer Learning Platform beyond ATD for children. Some reflected that the Platform had evolved beyond its initial mandate and would benefit from recognition of related migration policy issues, while others raised concerns that it may change their ability to participate in the Platform. IDC and the ADFM Secretariat will seek to strike a balance on this, allowing future Platform sessions to retain a focus on ATD and child protection, while meaningfully situating this within broader migration governance issues and systems.

IDC and the ADFM Secretariat will now work with participants to develop the next phase of the Platform, including:

- Supporting national-level policy processes, such as migration policy, child protection, livelihood opportunities, right to legal work initiatives and improving public perception towards migrants and refugees.
- Supporting implementation of the forthcoming ASEAN Guidelines on Alternatives to Detention, including translating the Guidelines into concrete national priorities.
- Supporting bilateral dialogue and cooperation between countries to strengthen cross-border child protection systems, particularly where children and families are affected by migration across borders.
- Strengthening opportunities for peer learning, including bilateral exchanges and inviting other countries to share relevant experiences on a one-off basis while maintaining the Platform's current community-of-practice approach.
- Ensuring that children's voices, particularly those with experience of detention or ATD programmes, remain central to future policy discussions.
- Continuing dialogue on the future scope of the Platform and its links with broader migration policy developments.

We will continue to work with participants on these priorities, as well as the timing and location of the next regional meeting, and other bilateral convenings that can take place in the meantime. For further information, please contact asiapacific@idcoalition.org.