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Refugees need place to sleep, opportunity to work

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Asylum seekers sit on the sidewalks of Kebon Sirih, Jakarta, hoping to gain protection from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (JP/Dhoni Setiawan)

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Over the past few weeks hundreds of refugees, including women and children, have been living on the street outside the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugee (UNHCR) Indonesia office in Kebon Sirih, Central Jakarta. Indonesian media outlets have covered this extensively, but have not examined the crucial question of “why” these families are choosing to live on the street.

With no legal right to work in Indonesia and no assistance coming from the UNHCR, International Organization for Migration (IOM) or the Indonesian government, they do not have anywhere else to go.

Many of the refugee community members currently at Kebon Sirih have been living on the streets outside Kalideres Immigration Detention Center for the past 12 to 18 months. Indonesia’s detention situation is unique in the region because it is the only country where the Australian government has funded the IOM to provide basic support to thousands of refugees in detention centers across Indonesia, enabling them to survive.

However, in March 2018, because of a reduction in Australian government funding, the IOM announced it would not provide support to any additional refugees. This left people who had exhausted their savings no choice but to sleep on the streets.

At its peak over 450 refugees, including pregnant women and many children, were living on the streets of Kalideres. For the first few months of this crisis charities and individuals gathered with handouts of food and water. Serious health conditions were managed and a small number of public toilets were erected, along with tent space for 80 to 100 people.

Over time support and assistance has decreased. Many people in Indonesia want to help but are unaware of the unique stresses affecting refugee community members differently to vulnerable local populations: Legal barriers, language barriers, the continuing trauma of past persecution, lack of trust in the authorities and many more. Many charities are also unaware that supporting refugees is a long-term endeavor.

As refugees are not allowed to work in Indonesia, their only option is to rely on charity. This means they will continue to need high levels of support until they

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either leave Indonesia, or are able to sustain themselves in some other way. These long-term needs and additional vulnerabilities place pressure on individuals and organizations who want to support refugees living on the streets but have no specific training or experience.

Local communities were at first very supportive of refugees forced to sleep on the street, but over time some people have understandably lost patience as the situation has become protracted. Constantly struggling with the pollution, noise, heat, humidity and rainfall while living on Jakarta's streets, many refugees' physical and mental health has deteriorated.

After 18 months, with support faltering and the situation becoming unmanageable, some made the decision to move to the front of the UNHCR office in Kebon Sirih to continue asking for help. As media interest increased, more people have made the same move.

Now confusion reigns about what to do with this vulnerable community. Place them in another temporary location until the next crisis? Ask international organizations to do more? Relieve the constant stress of refugee populations, and of the individuals and groups that support this population? Or consider this the perfect opportunity to look at the structural causes and address them in a way that is beneficial to all.

In December 2016, President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo signed Presidential Regulation No 125/2016 on the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. It outlines the technical details of ministerial responsibility for managing the arrival, basic accommodation and emergency needs of the refugee population. It also delegates to local governments the responsibility to allocate costs for refugee support from their budgets. A circular letter from the Home Ministry also allows local governments to act, however this has not yet occurred.

Without either allocated funding for the provision of government shelters and basic needs, or legal rights to sustain themselves, many refugees have little choice but to continue living on the streets of Jakarta with no safety, no security, no future and very little choice.

Indonesia is not the only country in the region to face this challenge – in fact, Indonesia's neighbors host much larger refugee populations. The number of refugees in Indonesia has been stable at around 14,000 individuals since 2015, much less than Malaysia's 150,000 and Thailand's 110,000.

What is unique to Indonesia is that this situation could be easily addressed with no negative impacts to the Indonesian economy, security, cultures or communities.

The number of able-bodied adult refugees in Indonesia that would be able to work to sustain themselves and their families is small.

Around 30 percent of the refugee population are children, 1 percent are elderly and others live with disabilities and chronic illnesses.

In a population of 250 million people, allowing a few thousand refugees the right to support themselves and their communities seems like an easy choice, and would relieve the need for local governments to allocate budgets to support them. Some officials have expressed the concern that this would create a pull factor, drawing more asylum seekers to Indonesia.

There is no evidence to support this. The Philippines signed the refugee convention decades ago and allows refugees the right to work along with many other rights, yet continues to have the smallest refugee population in the region.

Allowing able bodied refugees to contribute and give back to Indonesia would promote further understanding, lead to more community inclusion, empower both host and refugee communities, allow the sharing of skills and growth of new friendships, and meet many of the aims of the Global Compact on Refugees, which Indonesia signed at the end of 2018.

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Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official stance of The Jakarta Post.

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