

REFUGEE-LED GOVERNANCE IN TRANSITION: LEADING THE SHIFT FROM AID DEPENDENCE TO SELF-RELIANCE ON THE THAILAND–MYANMAR BORDER

*A research paper supported by the
“Walking the Talk: Shifting Power, Innovation and Enhanced Agility
to Displacement” (WTT) project, supported by ANCP*



1. BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Since the early 1980s, conflict in southeastern Myanmar has driven repeated waves of displacement into Thailand, resulting in the establishment of nine refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. Although initially conceived as short-term humanitarian responses, these camps have persisted for more than four decades, evolving into complex social and political spaces characterised by protracted displacement.

After decades of conflict, a fragile ceasefire and a period of political reform created conditions for a nascent voluntary repatriation process, with some refugees beginning to return home to Myanmar. That process was interrupted by the February 2021 military coup, which marked a decisive escalation in conflict and state fragmentation. Armed resistance expanded rapidly across ethnic and central regions, accompanied by widespread human rights violations including aerial bombardment,

forced recruitment, village destruction, and targeted violence against civilians. Internal displacement inside Myanmar surpassed 3.5 million people by 2024, and periodic surges of cross-border movement into Thailand have continued, placing sustained pressure on Thai provincial authorities and humanitarian systems. As of May 2026, the verified caseload across nine camps exceeds 104,000 individuals. With return to Myanmar no longer viable and third-country resettlement to the United States indefinitely suspended in early 2025, the overwhelming majority of refugees will continue to remain in the camps. At the same time, the funding model that had sustained that system has become under severe and growing strain.

For more than four decades, the camp system was sustained by international humanitarian funding, primarily from the United States and other major donors, which

enabled INGOs to provide food, fuel, shelter, healthcare, and other essential services to camp residents. Because refugees were not permitted to work, they had become entirely reliant on externally provided assistance. That assistance functioned provided both basic support plus critical protection mechanisms, mitigating risks of food insecurity, exploitation, unsafe migration, and negative coping strategies.

In early 2025, that funding architecture began to collapse. The withdrawal of United States humanitarian funding led to a dramatic reduction in the services that INGOs were able to provide across the camps. The amount of food distributed to residents was cut. Health programmes were scaled back sharply. Services that communities had depended upon for forty years were withdrawn, in many cases abruptly and without adequate notice or consultation. While the US cuts were the most pronounced and immediate, they were part of a broader and accelerating global decline in humanitarian funding that left INGOs without the resources to continue providing services they had delivered for decades.

This funding collapse was the direct catalyst for the transition now underway. On 1 October 2025, following a Cabinet Resolution passed on 26 August 2025, the Royal Thai Government implemented a new policy allowing eligible refugees to leave the camps to work. The policy represented a significant and welcome shift, opening a path towards self-reliance for a population that had lived under severe movement and employment restrictions throughout their time in Thailand. The transition this research examines is therefore a dual one: the reduction of humanitarian services that communities had relied upon, alongside the emergence of new opportunities for refugees to support themselves. Both are happening simultaneously, and at pace.



2. RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTIONS

A great deal has been written about this transition, but relatively little has focused on the role of refugee communities and camp committees within it. Refugee-run governance systems sit at the heart of decision-making and daily life in the camps. They have a deeper understanding than any external actor of how communities are responding to and adapting to the changes around them. While the transition opens significant new opportunities for refugees to work outside the camps, it also brings substantial new challenges. This paper seeks to document both, and to highlight the vital role that refugee governance structures are playing in trying to make the transition work.

The research is organised around three core questions: what refugee governance systems are doing to manage the transition; what challenges they face in doing so; and what support they need to fulfil their roles effectively.

Primary data was collected through focus group discussion workshops and ongoing dialogue with the following organisations:

Research Participants

- Karenni Refugee Committee (KnRC)
- Karen Refugee Committee (KRC)
- Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp Committee
- Mae Ra Ma Luang Camp Committee
- Mae La Oon Camp Committee
- Mae La Camp Committee
- Umpiem Mai Camp Committee
- Nu Po Camp Committee
- Ban Dong Yang Camp Committee
- Tham Hin Camp Committee

This is a research paper intended for humanitarian practitioners, policymakers, and donors, and presents findings in accessible terms, prioritising the voices and analysis of refugee governance actors throughout.



3. THE ARCHITECTURE OF REFUGEE-LED GOVERNANCE

The Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) was established in 1975 and has played a foundational role in running refugee camps along the border since their inception in 1984. Critically, the camps were founded and administered by the KRC from the outset; international NGOs arrived only later. The Karenni Refugee Committee (KnRC) was founded in 1987. Unlike governance arrangements created by or delegated from international agencies, the KRC and KnRC are indigenous institutions that preceded and shaped the internally led humanitarian response, rather than being produced by it.

Refugee-led governance is organised through a multi-layered institutional architecture. At its core are Camp Committees, elected by camp residents every three years, responsible for overall administration, coordination with humanitarian agencies and Thai authorities, oversight of service delivery, and the maintenance of internal order. Below Camp Committees, Section Committees operate at sub-camp level, providing day-to-day governance closer to households, enabling rapid identification of protection concerns and reinforcing social cohesion.

Specialised refugee-led organisations complement these structures: Women's Organisations, Youth Organisations, and sector committees covering education, health, shelter, and livelihoods. By 2025, women held approximately 37 per cent of leadership positions across camp governance structures. Governance functions extend well beyond representation, encompassing beneficiary targeting, distribution oversight, emergency preparedness, and mediation mechanisms embedded within refugee institutions rather than externalised to humanitarian agencies.

Refugee-led governance institutions have demonstrated sustained capacity across three distinct stress tests, each placing exceptional demands on community leadership structures operating with limited resources and no formal legal authority.

During the COVID-19 response, Camp Committees established health task forces, coordinated with refugee health workers, and achieved compliance with movement controls largely through negotiation and peer accountability rather than coercion. Following the February 2021 coup, refugee governance institutions coordinated registration of new arrivals, reallocated shelter space, and mobilised community support networks, enabling humanitarian agencies to scale assistance more effectively. In both cases, refugee-led institutions functioned as first responders in ways that external actors alone could not have replicated at the same speed or with the same legitimacy.

The most complex stress test, however, is the current one. The collapse of humanitarian funding in 2025 and the introduction of the right-to-work policy on 1 October 2025 have placed compounding demands on governance structures that are simultaneously absorbing new responsibilities and losing the external support that sustained them for decades. The abrupt withdrawal and reduction of services including food, healthcare, water, waste management, after more than forty years of reliable provision has required refugee governance institutions to step into a gap that is widening faster than communities can fill it. These two shifts, reduced humanitarian services and new employment opportunities, are the twin drivers of a transition that refugee governance bodies are now managing largely on their own.

4. FINDINGS: WHAT REFUGEE GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS ARE DOING

The data reveals an extraordinary and largely unrecognised expansion in the scope of refugee governance. Camp Committees are performing functions that, until very recently, were the responsibility of international NGOs, and doing so with significantly reduced resources, no formal recognition of this expanded role, and funding drawn increasingly from within the community itself.

4.1 Managing the Service Transition

Following the withdrawal of INGO services, Camp Committees have assumed direct responsibility for a wide range of functions previously managed externally. Among the clearest examples are the establishment of WASH committees and the organisation of water supply, covering everything from digging wells and purchasing cement rings to installing solar pumps and sourcing generator fuel through community contributions. Waste collection is now managed internally, with committees paying for vehicle transport and organising collection zones among residents. Patient referrals to hospital are being financed and coordinated by committees themselves, covering transport costs of approximately 18,000 baht per month per camp, interpreter fees of 12,000 baht per month per camp, emergency costs and monthly dialysis fees, with an estimated 50,000 baht raised monthly from within the community. Committees are struggling to fill roles due to limited pay. Electricity provision is now organised through community donations following the end of external support. These activities are the basic infrastructure of camp life, and they are now being sustained almost entirely through community self-organisation and internal fundraising. The capacity to sustain this is finite, and it is already under strain.

“This was all done by INGOs in the past, now community and camp committee have to do all by ourselves” - Refugee Camp Committee

4.2 Supporting the Right-to-Work Transition

Refugee and Camp Committees are playing a central and largely unrecognised role in operationalising Thailand's right-to-work policy. Their involvement spans a wide range of functions, among them visiting farms, companies and work sites to identify opportunities and meet directly with private employers, and coordinating with Thai authorities, local village heads and employers to facilitate movement and resolve disputes. Committees are also monitoring refugees who leave for work and have create a complaint and respondent mechanism for each camp so they can respond to complaints and protection concerns, as well as conducting pre-departure training, including recruiting trainers and organising sessions for prospective workers. Beyond this, they are developing contracts and rules for refugees working outside camps to improve safety and conditions, and actively advocating with employers to hire refugees, including promoting opportunities specifically for women.

4.3 Maintaining Protection and Social Cohesion

Committees are also carrying out a broad range of community support and protection functions. These include running community forums to explain service reductions, share information about right-to-work developments and address misinformation, as well as conducting awareness-raising on SGBV, child neglect and drug use. Youth and sports activities are being organised to support social cohesion and address drug and alcohol issues, alongside the establishment of drug committees and the operation of checkpoints to limit drug access. Crime cases are now being followed up and referred to the Thai justice system, a function previously handled by INGOs. Annual household verification and population database management are also being carried out by committees, adding further to an already substantial administrative burden.

4.4 Building External Relationships

Refugee Committees have taken on a new more outward-facing role that goes well beyond traditional camp governance. Committees are meeting regularly with Thai local government, village heads, and provincial authorities; building relationships with private sector employers; liaising with CCSDPT, UNHCR, and INGOs to advocate for refugee needs; and responding to requests from Thai villages for support with natural resource management, landslide prevention, and river cleaning. Refugee governance is contributing to the broader local environment, not only to internal camp management.



5. FINDINGS: CHALLENGES FACING REFUGEE GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS

The challenges described by participants represent a structural crisis with three interlocking dimensions: a compounding resource gap as committees absorb more with less; a deepening protection emergency driven directly by funding cuts; and a fundamental failure of partnership from the international humanitarian system. These three dimensions reinforce one another, and addressing any one of them in isolation will not be sufficient.

5.1 Absorbing Responsibilities Without Resources

Camp Committees are absorbing an ever-expanding range of functions with no corresponding increase in financial support, staffing, or formal recognition. Healthcare referral costs, water provision, waste management, and community stipends are increasingly funded through internal community contributions. These contributions are becoming harder to sustain as savings diminish, as residents with means leave the camps, and as those remaining are disproportionately the most vulnerable. This means the community's capacity to self-fund essential services is declining at the same moment that demand for those services is rising. Leadership fatigue is growing. Camp management staff earn far less than they could working outside, and experienced leaders face a direct choice between their governance responsibilities and their family's survival. Without urgent investment in stipends and sustainable resourcing, the institutional knowledge built over decades will erode precisely when it is most needed.

"Camp management staff also want to go out for work, but if they do who will manage the camp?" - Refugee Camp Committee

5.2 A Deepening Protection Crisis

The data documents a significant and accelerating deterioration in protection conditions that is the direct consequence of ration reductions and INGO withdrawal:

- SGBV and domestic violence cases are rising, with fewer support services available to respond
- Child neglect is increasing as parents leave for work and leave children without adequate supervision or family networks to support them
- School dropout rates are rising, particularly among children whose families cannot afford fees or who are needed to contribute economically
- Youth drug and alcohol use is increasing, with limited opportunities and reduced programme support contributing to vulnerability
- High medical costs are leaving families unable to access treatment, with some facing catastrophic costs for conditions previously covered by INGO health programmes

This protection crisis is being managed by Camp Committees with insufficient resources and inadequate external support. The compounding pressure is also affecting governance itself: community participation in camp management has fallen, compliance with rules has weakened, and some residents are leaving informally without informing Camp Committees, creating coordination gaps and protection risks.

5.3 Unequal Access to the Right-to-Work Transition

The right-to-work policy is not equally accessible. Those without Ministry of Interior (DOPA) registration cannot access the formal work permit process and face exploitation if they seek to enter the workplace. Women and elderly refugees face fewer opportunities, as most employers prioritise younger male workers for manual and agricultural labour. Refugees in remote camps have limited nearby employment and face the additional difficulty of long-distance separation from family after decades of camp life. Language barriers remain significant: many refugees do not speak Thai, limiting both employment access and the ability to communicate with employers, colleagues, and service providers. Fear is also a factor; some residents have spent their entire lives in camps and are genuinely frightened to leave the only home they have ever known.

“INGOs are withdrawing support following the announcement of right to work, but not enough people are working outside support refugee run services yet. Refugees are still not self-sufficient yet” Refugee Camp Committee

5.4 Failures of Communication and Partnership

Perhaps the most consistent and forceful theme across the data is the failure of INGOs and UN agencies to communicate transparently, consult meaningfully, or treat refugee governance bodies as genuine partners:

- Camp Committees report not being informed of funding decisions, service reductions, or the rationale and timeline for changes, in one case they reported hearing about a major funding announcement through the news
- INGOs have reportedly used Refugee Committees as partners in funding applications without informing them or involving them in planning
- Thai health authorities engage in camps without coordinating with Camp Committees, excluding them from decisions that directly affect their communities
- Trainings and activities are duplicated across multiple organisations without coordination, consuming time without adding value
- INGOs have handed over facilities without proper documentation, creating legal and administrative ambiguity that continues to cause problems

“What NGOs are doing is not for the needs of refugees, it's for the needs of themselves to continue their job. It's not focused on the real needs of the community.” Member of refugee Camp Committee

Many respondents highlight an acute accountability failure in the humanitarian relationship on the border. Refugee Committees are being used to legitimise and deliver humanitarian programming while being denied the information, consultation, and agency that genuine partnership requires. The localisation agenda, formally endorsed by the humanitarian system, is not being meaningfully implemented.

6. FINDINGS: WHAT SUPPORT REFUGEE GOVERNANCE SYSTEMS NEED

There is no desire from refugees for continued dependency but rather a recognition that a transition of this scale and speed requires sustained investment in the institutions managing it. What is needed is the recognition of the work of Refugee Communities, and the resources to make the transition work.

6.1 Financial Sustainability for Governance

Significant increases in stipends for camp management staff are essential, as those in governance roles currently earn far less than they could working outside camps. Without competitive compensation, experienced leaders will leave and the institutional knowledge built over decades will be lost. Financial support is also needed for community meetings, public forums and workshops, alongside sustained, multi-year funding commitments rather than short-term grants that cannot support long-term planning. There is also a need to recognise that while some community support functions can be managed short-term by Camp Committees, they cannot be sustained over the long term without external financial support.

“Every NGO depends on camp leadership to do their jobs they get funding for, so they need to support the camp leadership” Refugee camp committee

6.2 Healthcare and Basic Services

Health insurance for all camp residents is a pressing need, including those without MOI registration, given the growing burden of unaffordable medical costs. This should be accompanied by financial support for patient referral costs, covering transport, interpreters and treatment. Support for health worker stipends is also critical following dramatic reductions in INGO-funded health staff; Umpiem Mai, for example, has seen its health workforce fall from 180 workers to just 22. Continued support for water, waste management and basic infrastructure is equally important, alongside active engagement from Thai municipal authorities on waste collection.

6.3 Inclusion and Identity

Thai identification cards for all eligible refugees are essential, including those who arrived after 2019 and those currently without MOI registration, so that they can participate fully in the right-to-work process and broader Thai society. Clear registration pathways are also needed for new arrivals and those without DOPA or UNHCR documentation, who currently face the greatest barriers to participation. Thai language training for both adults and children, with certificates recognised by employers and educational institutions, would further support integration and economic opportunity. Internet and phone connectivity inside camps is also important, enabling families to stay in contact with members working outside and allowing residents to independently research opportunities available to them.

6.4 Livelihood Support

Access to land for agricultural activities and animal raising inside camps would provide meaningful livelihood options for those unable to leave. This should be accompanied by financial support for land rental, seeds and tools. Support for job matching and employer engagement is equally important, including bringing employers directly into camps rather than relying solely on external pathways. Alongside this, there is a need for protection against exploitation by agents and middlemen who may charge refugees for job matching services.

6.5 Genuine Partnership and Information Sharing

Timely and transparent communication from INGOs and UN agencies is needed regarding funding decisions, service changes, timelines and rationale. Refugee Committees should also be meaningfully included in transition planning, including in decisions about how major donor funding is allocated and used. Training activities across organisations should be better coordinated to avoid duplication and ensure resources are focused on genuinely identified needs. All facility and service handovers should be formally documented, with legal clarity about responsibilities and assets. Finally, engagement from INGOs and UN agencies should be proactive and ongoing, rather than limited to moments when a crisis requires Camp Committee assistance.



7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings carry five concrete recommendations for humanitarian actors, donors, and policymakers engaged on the Thailand-Myanmar border and in comparable protracted displacement settings.

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Invest in Refugee Governance as Core Humanitarian Infrastructure

- Increase stipends for camp management staff to levels competitive with external employment. Losing experienced governance leaders at this moment is a threat to the entire transition.
- Provide multi-year, predictable funding for governance institutions covering meetings, forums, and administrative functions.
- Recognise formally that refugee governance institutions are absorbing functions previously carried by INGOs and resource them accordingly.
- Every NGO working in the camps depends on refugee governance to deliver its mandate. That dependency must be matched by genuine financial and institutional support.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Ensure Protection and Basic Services for All, Regardless of Registration

- Advocate for and support health insurance coverage for all camp residents, including those without MOI registration.
- Pursue registration pathways for new arrivals and the undocumented, whose exclusion from the right-to-work process creates acute vulnerability.
- Maintain humanitarian assistance, particularly food support, in parallel with self-reliance initiatives. A significant minority of camp residents cannot participate in the labour market due to non-eligibility, age, disability, or protection needs. Humanitarian assistance and self-reliance are not substitutes for one another.
- Ensure that INGOs withdrawing services do not do so faster than the transition can absorb.



RECOMMENDATION 3:

Address Structural Inequalities in the Right-to-Work Transition

- Invest in Thai language training for adults and children, with employer-recognised certification.
- Develop targeted employment pathways for women, including inside-camp livelihood options such as agricultural land access and animal raising.
- Ensure internet and communication access inside camps so families can stay connected and residents can independently access information and opportunities.
- Support Thai identification card issuance for all refugees, including those who arrived after 2019.
- Protect against exploitation by agents and middlemen through regulation, awareness-raising, and accessible complaints mechanisms.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Rebuild the Partnership With Refugee Governance Bodies

- Commit to timely, transparent communication about funding decisions, service changes, and transition timelines. Refugee Committees must not learn about decisions affecting their communities from third parties.
- Include refugee governance bodies meaningfully in transition planning, including decisions about how major donor funding is allocated and used.
- Coordinate training and capacity-building activities across organisations to avoid duplication and direct resources at genuinely identified needs.
- Formalise all service and facility handovers with proper documentation, clear legal status, and agreed responsibilities.
- Shift from reactive engagement to proactive, ongoing partnership that treats refugee governance as an institutional peer.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Build Governance Capacity Ahead of Policy Transitions and Recognise Its Political Dimension

- Emerging policy frameworks, including right to work and identification card issuance, expand governance responsibilities for refugee institutions. Capacity support must be proactive, not reactive.
- Invest in data management, protection monitoring, and accountability systems that enable Camp Committees to manage labour-related risks and maintain oversight of those working outside camps.
- Recognise refugee-led governance as a form of political agency, not merely a delivery mechanism. Humanitarian actors should actively support the legitimacy and authority of refugee governance institutions in engagement with Thai authorities, employers, and other stakeholders.
- Approaches that reduce governance to a technical function risk depoliticising processes that are inherently social and political in nature. Recognising refugee leadership as legitimate political agency does not challenge state sovereignty; it acknowledges the reality of governance in protracted displacement and the conditions under which durable, legitimate institutions are built.

8. CONCLUSION

The system on the Thailand–Myanmar border is undergoing forced reinvention, at speed, under pressure, and without adequate preparation. Communities that survived four decades of conflict, encampment, and constrained existence by virtue of a relatively stable humanitarian architecture are now navigating the collapse of that architecture alongside the emergence of new and unequal opportunities. Both are happening at the same time, and faster than the support structures around them are adapting.

The Karen Refugee Committee, the Karenni Refugee Committee, and the network of camp and section committees they anchor emerged from the communities themselves, shaped by decades of displacement, conflict and collective necessity. They have endured funding shocks, population influxes and a global pandemic without formal legal authority, with minimal external resourcing, and in a political environment that does not recognise the people they represent as rights-bearing subjects under international law.

The data from this research shows that these institutions are now performing a role that far exceeds what they were designed or resourced to do. They are self-financing water supply. They are absorbing healthcare referral costs from community contributions. They are building relationships with Thai employers, local government, and village heads. They are managing a protection crisis; rising SGBV, child neglect, school dropout, drug use, that is the direct consequence of funding decisions made far from the camps, by people who are not present to see the consequences.

They are doing all this while often being excluded from the decisions that shape their responsibilities, learning about major funding changes from the news, and watching the INGO system withdraw without adequate consultation, documentation, handover or replacement support.

How well this transition is managed will be determined by the strength and sustainability of refugee institutions themselves. A genuine pathway to dignity and independence requires choices made now: about stipends and funding, about partnership and consultation, about who is included and who is left behind. The risks of a two-tier outcome, where those with registration, language skills, and access to employment move forward while the most vulnerable fall further behind, are real and will require deliberate, sustained effort to address.

This paper was supported by the "Walking the Talk: Shifting Power, Innovation and Enhanced Agility to Displacement" (WTT) project, supported by ANCP.

