Access to Education for Refugee Children in Indonesia During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Challenges and Adaptation Strategies

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The protracted refugee situation in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic has increased refugee children's vulnerability due to the non-fulfillment of their fundamental rights, including the right to education. Drawing on data collected through interviews and observation of refugee children during fieldwork in the cities of Batam and Makassar, this paper aims to investigate how and why their access to education has changed during the pandemic. This study finds that, shortly before the pandemic, the Indonesian government provided access to education for refugee children through the issuance of the Circular Letter from the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology Number 752553/A.A4/HK/2019 dated on 10 July 2019. However, the pandemic complicated the accessibility of education for refugee children suggested by the Circular Letter due to lockdown policy and mobility restrictions. The complication is apparent in four aspects of accessibility, namely: access to information, activities in the learning process, environmental support, and the motivation of refugee children. Notwithstanding, this study also finds that the pandemic has induced developments of adaptation strategies through the adoption of online learning among refugee communities to enable wider access to education for refugee children. Therefore, the pandemic may have revealed the urgency for a more rights-based policy on refugee treatment in Indonesia.

Keywords: Accessibility; COVID-19 Pandemic; Refugee Children; Indonesia; Rights to Education

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is one of the refugee transit countries in Southeast Asia. As of February 2022, Indonesia hosted 13,174 refugees; 27% of them are children, primarily from Afghanistan, Somalia, Myanmar, Iraq, and Sudan.[1] As many as 97 children are

1 In this paper, the term 'refugee children' refers to children of refugees and asylum seekers in

unaccompanied minors, which means that they have arrived in Indonesia alone or were separated from their families (UNHCR, 2022). The protracted refugee situation in Indonesia has increased refugee children's vulnerability due to the non-fulfillment of their fundamental rights, including rights to education (Brown, 2018, p. 166; Lau, 2021).

Education for refugee children needs crucial attention as an inseparable part of children's rights. Sustainable access to education is vital to reducing their vulnerabilities and reaching their full potential despite their precarious situation (Dryden-Peterson, 2017). Under the situation, some researchers have indicated that education is necessary for restoring social and emotional wellbeing (Eisenbruch, 1988; Huyck & Fields, 1981; Sinclair, 2001). Contrarily, failure to provide access to education in the transit period will cause a 'lost learning' situation where refugee children's level of education is far behind their age because of long periods out of school (Mason & Orcutt, 2018; Cardinal, 2020). This situation might cause more problems in the future, such as low qualifications to enter the labor market.

Recently, researchers have started giving greater attention to pre-resettlement educational experiences, focusing on the role of multi-stake holders, including education provided by refugees themselves (Brown, 2018; Sinandang et al, 2021), education while in immigration detention (Suyoto, 2021) and countries of first asylum (Dryden-Peterson, 2016), protection from a legal and normative perspective (Adhi et. al. 2021; Asti & Rahayu, 2019; Shalihah & Putri, 2020), and education in emergencies or crises such as conflicts, disaster and pandemic (Jones et. al., 2022; Menashy & Zakharia, 2022; Sinclair, 2002; Shohel, 2022). Rohingyas refugees, including children who are living temporarily in camps in Bangladesh, for example, face barriers such as shortage of schools and learning materials to access education (Shohel, 2022). In times of the COVID-19 pandemic, Syrian refugee children in Lebanon also could not attend remote schooling and had a lack of access to the internet (Azba, 2022; Menashy & Zakharia, 2022). Other studies revealed the challenges faced by countries in Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean in adjusting their educational system in the midst of crisis while also facilitating refugees' right to education. The challenges range from structural barriers, gaps in educational outcomes, different policies and practices, increasing security threats, or mental health conditions affected by the crisis (Caarls, et.al 2021; Özgür Keysan, 2022; Parker & Alfaro, 2022; Saischeck, 2022).

Although it is acknowledged that access to education, especially in a transitory displacement and emergency context, can give a sense of normalcy and stability during an uncertain lengthy period of waiting time for resettlement (Mosselson et al., 2017, p. 15; Kristin & Dewi, 2021), these above previous studies have underlined the limitation on access to education among refugee children. There is limited access to education for refugee children in a transitory context and times of crisis, yet, there have not been many studies focusing on educational experiences of refugee children in transit countries such as Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic and through the lens of accessibility. To address these gaps, drawing from Greco (2018) and Ribot & Peluso (2003), we present a conceptual framework of accessibility to understand

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Indonesia, who may have arrived with their families or were born during the transit period, as well as those children who are unaccompanied or were separated from their families.

the complexities of access to education during the pandemic through four aspects, namely: access to information, activities in learning process, environmental support, and motivation and resilience.

This paper scrutinizes the situation and problems of access to education for refugee children in Indonesia throughout the pandemic, highlighting the early progress of implementation of the Circular Letter from the Secretary General of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology Number 752553/A.A4/HK/2019 dated on 10 July 2019 (hereinafter referred to as Circular Letter) and changes in national education policy due to the pandemic. The Circular Letter primarily indicates that refugee children can attend formal education in Indonesia if their enrolment meets the terms and conditions outlined in the Letter, such as not burdening state and regional budgets, prioritizing Indonesian school-age children, possessing a refugee card from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), receiving a referral from an immigration detention center, and obtaining a letter of financial guarantee from a sponsoring institution. Prior to the issuance of the Circular Letter, refugees' right to enroll in Indonesian schools had not been appropriately regulated, thus many schools were reluctant to accept refugee children. Some practices in enrolling refugees at schools were mostly on a humanitarian basis (Pudjiastuti & Putera, 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic hindered the implementation of the Circular Letter. Regulations on mobility restrictions to prevent the spread of virus, including lockdowns and school closures, further complicated access to education for refugee children. Self-isolation is extremely challenging for refugees in the midst of poor hygiene, crowd housings, and limited access to health facilities (Sadjad, 2020).

This paper consists of four sections. Following the introduction, the second section provides the methodology of this research. The third section reviews relevant literature on education as a child's human right and provides the notion of accessibility as a lens to analyze the access to education for refugee children. The fourth section discusses the main findings, including exploring refugee children's situation in Batam and Makassar and analyzing their access to education during the pandemic in Indonesia. Lastly, the conclusion reiterates the complexities of providing education for refugee children and sheds light on the crucial role of relevant actors in ensuring Indonesia's commitment to provide education for all, including refugee children.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study focuses on access to formal education in public and private schools in the cities of Batam (in the province of Riau Archipelago) and Makassar (in the province of South Sulawesi) to seek more sustainable and qualified educational options for refugees in a transitory context. The informal education provided by the refugee-led initiatives will only be discussed in the context of adaptation strategy during the pandemic, but not as the main focus of research. In 2021, Batam and Makassar had a substantial population of refugee children who had enrolled in formal education under the auspices of the International Organization for Migration/ IOM (2021). Afghans constitute the largest refugee population in Batam and Makassar, followed by a smaller group of refugees from Somalia, Sudan, Iran, and Pakistan. In Makassar, particularly, Myanmar's refugees were the second largest group.

We collected primary data through observations and in-depth interviews in June 2022. To do so, we visited community houses for refugee families at the Hotel Kolekta (Batam) as well as community house Wisma MSM and DKhanza (Makassar). We also visited schools[2] that have refugee students enrolled to observe their daily educational activities and interview the headmasters and teachers. During our visit, we interviewed 6 refugee parents from different national origin (Afghanistan, Sudan, Sri Lanka, and Somalia) who have been living in Indonesia for 5-10 years and 5 refugee children[3] who were enrolled in primary and secondary schools[4] during the fieldwork phase of study. We also conducted interviews with government officials at local and national levels, including immigration officers at immigration detention centers, city education office heads, and the local task forces for handling refugees – in Batam, officers from the National and Political Unity Agency (*Badan Kesatuan Bangsa dan Politik/BAKESBANGPOL)* and the head of the Social Affairs Office in Makassar. We also interviewed the Mayor of Makassar City and the Acting Director of Special Education and Services in the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. In addition, we interviewed representatives of the UNHCR and IOM.

This research is subject to several limitations. First, our access to the refugee community was mainly facilitated by the Directorate General of Immigration, Indonesia's Ministry of Law and Human Rights, education offices, and the heads of schools. Consequently, it may not represent the whole refugee communities in Batam and Makassar. Second, the short time period for the fieldwork hindered our capability to conduct a longer observation with all relevant stakeholders at the local and national level. However, we tried to optimize in-depth interviews with as many actors as possible. We also used online meetings to interview informants that were unavailable during the fieldwork. Third, there were language barriers, particularly in making communication and interacting with refugee parents and children. While some refugees who had lived more than ten years in Indonesia spoke Bahasa Indonesia well, not all of our research participants were fluent in Indonesian or English to a point enabling a comfortable conversation during the observation and interviews. We addressed the language difficulties by asking help from refugees who spoke fluent English or Bahasa Indonesia to be interpreters.

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2 Other than the schools of our refugee children's participants, we also interviewed headmasters and teachers in SDN BTN Unggulan Pemda, State Junior High School (*Sekolah Menengah Pertama Negeri* or SMPN) 41 Batam and SMPN 48 Makassar.

3 We acknowledged the sensitivities of conducting research involving refugees, particularly children from vulnerable communities. The ethical process includes dual consent from refugee children and refugee parents/caregivers/guardians. Furthermore, the involvement of refugee children below 10 years old is limited to observation of their activities in schools and short conversation instead of in-depth interviews. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethical Committee for Social Sciences and Humanities, National Research and Innovation Agency (*Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional*/BRIN), Indonesia (approval number: 025/KE.01/SK/4/2022).

4 Three children were enrolled in Lubuk Baja 5 and Lubuk Baja 2 State Elementary Schools (*Sekolah Dasar Negeri* or SDN) in Batam; two children were enrolled in Senior High School (*Sekolah Menengah Atas* or SMA) Frater Makassar.

CHILDREN'S RIGHT AS HUMAN RIGHTS

According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) of 1989 article 2, refugee children should enjoy their rights as children irrespective of their legal status. CRC (1989) also states that children are not just adults in training or objects that belong to their parents and for whom decisions are made. Instead, they are human beings and individuals with their own rights. The CRC (1989, Article 1) asserts that childhood is separate from adulthood and it lasts until the age of 18[5]. Within this time, fulfilling the right to education during childhood and under any circumstances is essential for transforming children's lives.

In relation to the fulfillment of children's rights, Hannah Arendt's concept of "the right to have rights" is a useful framework for analysis (Arendt, 1973; Azar, 2019; Lundberg, 2018; Walters, 2021). Arendt argues that refugees lack citizenship and human rights and naturally lose their fundamental rights, such as access to health, education, and livelihoods (Lundberg, 2018, pp. 71-72). Arendt herself, as we note above, expressed grave concerns about whether being human was, in practice, enough to enable anyone to enjoy rights without also being a citizen of a nation-state. DeGooyer (2018, p. 41) offers interpretation of the notion "to have rights" as to "participate in staging, creating, and sustaining (through protest, legislation, collective action, or institution building) a common political world where the ability to legitimately claim and demand rights becomes a possibility for everyone". However, in reality, refugee rights' protection remains dependent on third countries' regulations and policies, as no international organizations could provide sustainable conditions to uphold human rights - only the nation-state (Boehm, 2015). Drawing upon Arendt's concept and interpretations as well as Indonesia's obligations under international law, Indonesia is the primary duty-bearer to accommodate and facilitate the fulfillment of children's rights, including education.

ACCESSIBILITY TO EDUCATION

The concept of accessibility can be used to understand the fulfillment of refugees' rights to education. Greco (2016) argued that accessibility can be interpreted as a proactive principle for the achievement of human rights. In the context of a nation-state, it is necessary for the state as the duty bearer to specify access as an essential condition for satisfying the fulfillment of human rights for any person under its jurisdiction (Greco, 2016, p. 11; Broderick, 2020). Further, in the context of education, Greco (2018, 2019) also called for a systematic approach to the practice(s) of teaching and learning accessibility in which it accommodates the essential parts of accessibility, including: acknowledgment of human diversity, active participation to create an inclusive social environment, universal account of access, and user-centered approaches.

Access refers to all the ways a person can get benefit, including access to information. Accessibility and availability depend on approach, action, and organization. Ribot and Peluso (2003, 153-154) state that access is defined as "the ability to benefit

5 The issue of accurate age estimation to determine children status in a refugee context is still subject to discussion, concerning that refugee children may be under circumstances in which it is difficult to determine their true age or level of education (Benson & William, 2008).

from things," expanding on the traditional definition of property as "the right to benefit from things." Capability to access rights concerns the actual capacity of access seekers to enjoy access rights through various means inherent in the system. The combination of rights and abilities requires that accessibility concerns three dimensions: availability to all without legal or other discrimination, easy access without physical barriers, and no economic conditions that limit or deny enjoyment or benefits (Ribot & Peluso, 2003; Dio, 2016). Building on these dimensions, access can also be interpreted as the ability to access, which can arise or affect social relationships that limit or allow for the benefits of resources. Accessibility is also the process of obtaining a benefit either directly or through any individual, organization or group of individuals and maintaining that influence over time to benefit from resources or services (Ribot & Peluso, 2003). Accessibility can be obtained through regulating the availability of information to enroll in public schools, affirmative regulation, and a supportive environment.

Drawing from these thoughts on accessibility, this paper develops a framework of accessibility to education for refugee children in Indonesia particularly during pandemic times, consisting of four essential elements: access to information, educational activities and learning processes, environmental support, and motivation.

Access to Information

The availability of information is fundamental to providing education for refugee children. Information must be delivered through accessible channels for refugees and easily understood by refugees. Okai (2019) emphasizes theory of justice and equality that information should be available to all users. The information available in the context of refugees is not only to ensure that there is information, but the refugees must also understand the information. Due to their socio-cultural vulnerability, refugees are prone to language and cultural barriers (Mavhura et al., 2017). Differences in values, norms, and practices between the refugee-origin areas and their new host communities can cause different interpretations of information. They may lead to discrimination and exclusion from participation in social and community life. This phenomenon can also cause refugee parents and children to be reluctant to access education despite the available access.

Educational Activities and Learning Processes

Teaching methods can make the learning environment more accessible to all refugee children students, who have a wide range of physical, cognitive, emotional, and psychological abilities (Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). During the COVID-19 pandemic, it was important for educators to innovate the learning environment to engage students in educational activity and give them many opportunities to demonstrate their learning. Inclusive pedagogy, developed at the University of Chicago, indicates there are at least three processes to make education accessible to refugee children (The University of Chicago, n.d). First, provide lessons in different means of representation. Based on the premise that learners access information differently, this principle encourages flexible ways to present information. Second, facilitate students to actively

demonstrate their understanding in different ways. Third, enable students to connect with content and problem processes, and actively engage in group work.

Environmental Support for Education

Lauria (2017) indicates that transforming the environment (material and social) towards human capacity affects individual behavior. Environmental accessibility is a collective resource that can increase the social capital of a community to provide value to the members of the community. It is not only limited to products, services, and environments that can be accessed and used but includes the role of policies, structures, technology, and production and distribution processes (UNDESA, 2013). It means support from surroundings including family and the refugee community, schools, international agencies, and government in terms of material aspects such regulation, educational facilities, financial support for transport and other costs, as well as immaterial aspects such as encouragement and social receptiveness. Therefore, the environment is not a neutral space but always affects and is influenced by involved actors.

Motivation to Pursue Education

The ability of social adaptation may affect the refugees' views and perception of what is happening around them and what matters to them, including the urgency and importance of taking education for their children. Refugees often find it hard to adapt socially to new environments, which may affect their motivation to access education. The adaptation process depends on how the 'social pocket' containing the original culture, habitus, and belief system can be practiced in a new location (Bailey, 2017; Obiezu, 2019). It also relies on how refugees perceive the attitude of receiving communities, which may be reluctant (Wong-Rieger & Quintana, 1987) or more open and receptive (Birman et al., 2005) towards the presence of refugee communities. In addition, Reinhardt et al. (2021) identified that the individual motivations of refugee children greatly affect their survival. Language ability, cognitive function, and sociodemographic factors such as gender and country of residence affect the retention of refugee students during online studies.

THE SITUATION OF EDUCATION ACCESS FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN IN BATAM AND MAKASSAR

Good practices to provide formal education for refugee children in Makassar and Batam existed prior to the pandemic. In Makassar, some formal schools have provided education access for refugees even before the issuance of the Circular Letter. The education of refugee children in formal schools has been carried out and became one of the points in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between IOM and the Makassar City Government on 21 September 2015 (Syahrul, 2019). Following this MoU, several formal schools were ready to accept refugee students at the elementary level, whose studies would be funded by IOM (Gabiella & Putri, 2018). Meanwhile, the first intake of refugee children to formal schools in Batam was in January 2020. The

head of the Batam City Education Office (interviewed on 14 June 2022) stated that the Circular Letter legitimizes their cooperation with IOM, which had previously asked public schools in Batam to accept refugee children with no success.

International agencies such as UNHCR and IOM have given financial assistance and initiated programs to ensure refugee children's access to education. However, UNHCR Indonesia has limited capabilities in educational assistance for refugees, which then gives IOM space, with greater financial support, to carry out this assistance (interview with UNHCR staff in Tanjung Pinang and Makassar, 23-24 June 2022). Therefore, in both cities, we found that most refugee children attending formal schools were receiving IOM assistance. Based on an interview with the IOM Coordinator for the Eastern Indonesia Region in Makassar (23 June 2022), IOM provided special staff and funding to support the provision of access to education for refugee children. Refugee dependency on international agencies is unavoidable since refugees in Indonesia have limited access to economic opportunities and resources to become more self-sufficient.

The IOM plays an important role for refugee students, schools and government officials alike. Based on several interviews with refugee parents in both cities, they rely on IOM to start the school search process, negotiate administrative requirements and costs with schools, find alternative funding and finance school needs, buy school supplies, discuss educational developments and resolve problems if children have difficulties in school. Meanwhile, schools rely on IOM as a bridge between schools, parents, and students with language barriers and other access limitations due to their refugee status (interviews with headmasters and teachers at schools, 13-24 June 2022). From interviews with the heads of city education offices in Batam and Makassar (14 and 22 June 2022), they rely on IOM to obtain up-to-date data on the profile of refugee children and actively involve IOM in developing appropriate educational programs for refugee children. Previously, IOM has also cooperated with a local non-governmental organization in Makassar to prepare educational program curricula for refugee children aged 6 to 18 and organize non-formal language courses by bringing in on-call teachers from outside or from among refugees who have mastered Bahasa Indonesia at the community housing facilities (interview with IOM Coordinator for Indonesian Eastern Region, 22 June 2022; Syahrul, 2019).

However, the practice of enrolling refugee children in schools continues to face obstacles, such as limited financial support, language proficiency, unclear mechanism for class placement, the absence of a formal certificate after study completion, and lack of support from family (interviews with refugee parents and headmaster of schools, 15-24 June 2022). The official declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic in mid-March 2020 added to existing obstacles, as it saw in-school learning shift to remote learning. According to our interviews with IOM staff in Batam (18 June 2022), COVID-19 is one of the determining factors causing refugee children to stop accessing formal education. Other factors are (1) parents and refugee unreadiness due to lacking proficiency in Bahasa Indonesia; (2) a prevailing mindset that their stay in Indonesia is temporary; (3) availability of informal classes, including those provided by IOM and from the refugee-led initiatives; and (4) political factors, including that refugee children were sometimes involved with their parents' demonstrations during school time.

During the pandemic, Batam and Makassar still conducted learning for all students, including refugee children scattered in many places within the two cities. The National and Political Unity Agency of Batam City (15 June 2022) reported that until November 2021, there had been 484 refugees from eight countries living in the area, mainly from Afghanistan. The Head of the Batam Education Office (14 June 2022) stated that the overall number of school-age refugee children (3 to 18 years) is 97. Meanwhile, data from the IOM as of June 2022 confirms that 43 children are enrolled in Batam's public schools (*see* Table 1). Following up on the issuance of the Circular Letter, shortly before the Pandemic, the Batam City Government assigned primary and secondary schools near their residential areas to accept refugee children as students (Interview with the Head of the Batam City Education Office, 14 June 2022). They were enrolled from January 2020 in four assigned public schools: (1) Anggrek II Early Childhood Education Center, (2) State Elementary School (Sekolah Dasar Negeri/ SDN) Lubuk Baja 2, (3) SDN Lubuk Baja 5 and (4) State Special Schools. It should be noted that until June 2022, three refugee children were enrolled in State Junior High School (*Sekolah Menengah Pertama Negeri*/ SMPN) 41 Batam. However, the headmaster disclosed their absence during the learning period (interviewed on 14 June 2022). Later, IOM confirmed that two of them had moved to another city as part of the resettlement process to a third country and some lost their motivation to go to school due to language barriers (personal communication on 14 June 2022).

Profile	Batam	Makassar
Total number of enrollments	45	173
Country of Origin	Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Iraq	Afghanistan, Myanmar, Somalia, Sudan
Level of Education		
• PAUD	28	72
• primary school	17	73
• secondary school (junior and senior high school)	-	28

Table 1. Profile of refugee children active enrollment in formal education in Batam and Makassar (own data compilation)

As of April 2022, there were 1,536 refugees consisting of 1,181 men and 355 women who lived in more than 20 refugee shelters throughout Makassar (IOM Makassar, 2022), a city of some 1.5 million people (Statistics of Makassar City, 2021). IOM Makassar (2022) stated there are 173 children in Makassar, which consists of 72 children in early childhood and kindergarten, 73 in elementary schools, 18 in junior high schools, and 10 in Senior High School. According to IOM data, schools that have enrolled most refugee students in Makassar are private schools, namely Cornerstone (preschool and elementary school) and Senior High School (*Sekolah Menengah Atas*/ SMA) Frater. In addition, the incumbent Mayor of Makassar (interviewed on 21 June 2022) even initiated a discussion with universities in Makassar to explore the opportunity for local universities to open their access to refugee children (see also Missbach et. al, 2018).

ACCESS TO EDUCATION FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN IN BATAM AND MAKASSAR DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Due to the World Health Organization (WHO)'s declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020, the Indonesian government made several adjustments regarding educational activities (*see* Figure 1). The Ministry of Education issued the regulation on the Large-Scale Social Restriction (*Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar*-PSBB) under Government Regulation Number 21/2020. Through this policy, the government stipulated several restrictions for activities in public places and facilities, including the closure of schools and workplaces. The derivative regulation issued by the Regulation of the Minister of Health (*Peraturan Menteri Kesehatan*-PMK) Number 9/2020 also regulated school closure (Article 13). According to the regulation, school closure entails substituting in-school teaching and learning processes with home-based education using the most effective media, either through their laptop or handphone as the main devices to access education (Giatman et al, 2020; Huwaidi et al, 2021; Qibthiyah 2021; Sparrow et al, 2020).

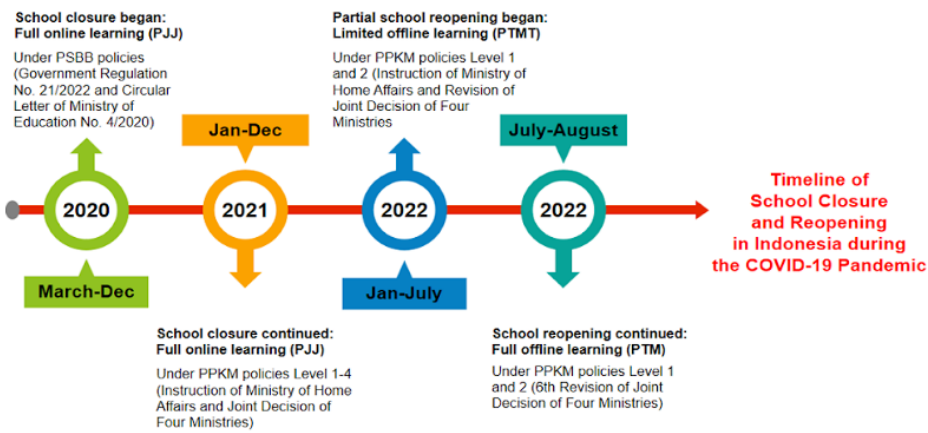

Figure 1. Timeline of School Closure and Reopening in Indonesia during the COVID-19 Pandemic (own data compilation)

The provision of school closure was strengthened by the issuance of the Ministry of Education Circular Letter Number 4/2020. This letter outlined several educational policies during the pandemic, including distance learning, the cancellation of national and final exams, and the relaxation of School Operational Funds (*Bantuan Operasional Sekolah* - BOS) utilization[6]. Since then, most school-aged children in Indonesia have conducted distance learning activities (*Pembelajaran Jarak Jauh*-PJJ) from home. The regulation of distance learning also applies to refugee children enrolled in formal education.

6 BOS was taken from the state budget (*Anggaran Pendapatan dan Belanja Negara* - APBN) and initially aimed to support expenses related to operationalization of education programs. During the pandemic, the Ministry of Education provided flexibility for schools to use the fund for supporting the needs for distance learning such as to buy internet credit, hygiene equipment (hand sanitizers, disinfectants, masks) or to pay honorary teachers (Mudjisusatyo et al, 2022).

The accessibility of education for refugee children during the pandemic has become more complicated in four aspects: information availability, learning activities, environmental support, and perception of refugees.

Insufficient Availability of Information

The Circular Letter on Access to Education for refugee children is essential as a technical guideline on enrollment procedures and specific conditions for stakeholders delivering education services for refugee children. According to the Head of Batam City Education office (interviewed on 14 June 2022), the Circular Letter helped schools to better understand the national requirements for accepting refugee children since the Education Office and schools previously depended on IOM directives. Our online interview with IOM staff in Batam (18 June 2022) confirmed the significance of the Circular Letter to providing information on enrolling refugee children in public schools to officials:

> Before the circular letter, we felt that the public schools with School Operational Funds could only be accessed by Indonesian citizens, so we looked for private schools for them [refugee children]. After the presence of a circular letter, there is an opportunity for refugee children to enroll in public schools, and the process is quite fast.[7]

The process of educating authorities about the Circular Letter greatly improved information availability and thus education access for refugee children. Previously, local education offices and schools were unsure whether to accept refugee children due to administrative barriers such as the absence of recognized identity documents and diplomas from previous education levels and concerns over accepting financial support from international agencies (interview with the Headmaster of SMPN 48 Makassar, 23 June 2022). During the pandemic, online methods were the principal adaptation strategy for the indirect distribution of information to education service providers. Relevant stakeholders remained committed to maintaining the availability of information on refugee children's access to education. Provision of information to stakeholders regarding education access for refugee children was conducted either by fully online mode or through hybrid meetings, facilitating both offline and online participants. For example, the recent hybrid special coordination meeting was held on 29 June-1 July 2022 by the Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs in collaboration with IOM on 'Improving Education Access, Productivity, and Protection for Foreign Refugees'. IOM also worked closely with the Municipal Education Department to conduct workshops for best practice sharing among teachers, as held in mid-June 2022 in Makassar.

Local authorities have, however, continued to rely on international organizations to bridge communication with and provide information to the refugee community, rather than provide such information directly. UNHCR Indonesia provides essential information on its website about the available education services for refugees in

7 In this paper, the authors have translated all interview quotations from Indonesian into English.

Indonesia and contact information for further inquiries. However, the information remains Jakarta-centric, as it does not include educational access for refugees living outside Jakarta and its surrounding regions (UNHCR Indonesia, n.d). The availability of educational information for refugee children in Batam and Makassar therefore relies on IOM. IOM delivers information to refugee children and their parents regarding options to enroll in formal education. IOM staff in Makassar (interviewed on 21 June 2022) explained that:

> We provide the refugee children with School Readiness Program (SRP). … Those who have passed SRP will get recommendation grade, and also we will make a letter to the Disdik kota Makassar with the grade recommendation and school recommendation based on location. Disdik will make the recommendation letter. But, … these [the school recommendation] only our recommendation, so if the parents choose to move or select another school, they are free to do that but of course with certain consequences, such as longer distance.

Limited mechanisms remain for local offices or schools to provide outreach to refugee communities without IOM help to deliver information about accessing education. The Circular Letter does not require schools to proactively deliver information about education access to refugee children in their areas. Consequently, schools do not see it as their responsibility to increase the enrollment rate of refugee students. Moreover, there is a hesitance to make direct communication with refugees, primarily due to language barriers (Interview with the Head of SMPN 41 Batam, 15 June 2022). Despite the fact that there are some refugees who have resided in Indonesia for long periods and have learned Bahasa Indonesia, most of our informants from government offices and schools have highlighted the difficulties in communicating with refugees. Many Indonesian officials do not speak English, a language refugees have tended to focus on learning. Given this situation, a communication gap emerged during the pandemic since IOM had limited capacity to make regular in-person communication with refugee communities. At the same time, schools and teachers depend on IOM to gain information about their refugee students.

Limited Educational Activities and Learning Processes

Another aspect that heightened complexities in children's access to education during the pandemic were changes to learning activities. Face-to-face learning activity was changed to distance learning, meaning classes were conducted via virtual online meetings and teachers assigned students to independently work on exercises in their textbooks. After completing the assignment, students would submit it by sending a photo of the assignment to the teacher, who then graded it based on the submitted assignment. Using the group function on the WhatsApp instant messaging application, the school facilitated the dissemination of information and submitting homework. Through the WhatsApp group, teachers and guardians/parents of students could also communicate regarding learning activities.

In addition to the assignment system, distance learning was carried out with meeting applications such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meets. Through

these applications, students interacted virtually with teachers and fellow students. The teacher also explained the learning material directly or through presentation materials prepared beforehand. However, online meetings require greater internet quota, technology support and devices such as laptops, tablets, or smartphones, which may not be available in all schools and for every student. Since schools did not facilitate the device for online learning, refugee children were required to provide it for themselves. In the case of refugee students, including those in Batam and Makassar, additional technology needs for online schooling depend on which system was implemented by the school. In Batam, public schools mostly used an assignment system (Interview with Head of Batam city education office, 14 June 2022); therefore, refugees only required smartphones to participate in the learning process. Meanwhile, refugees experiencing education in private schools in Makassar need to have more technological support due to active virtual online meetings (Interview with Headmaster of SMA Frater, 23 June 2022).

In practice, both distance learning systems still presented several obstacles, not only for students and parents but also for teachers and schools. One of the obstacles is language barriers, which have hindered refugee children from participating in educational activities prior to and during the pandemic. The IOM offices in Batam and Makassar have tried to address this language issue by providing a mentor or on-call teacher under the School Readiness Program (SRP) for refugee children. The mentor helps children study after school to improve their Indonesian language skills and help them do their homework. SRP in Batam provides Indonesian language classes at Hotel Kolekta for pre-school and school-age children. In addition, other schools, such as the SMA Frater in Makassar, attempted to overcome language barriers by trying to explain lessons in English since refugee children better understand it. The headmaster of SMA Frater (intervewed on 23 June 2022) explained that "during the teacher's forum we informed that there will be refugee students, so all students and teachers should adapt too… because not all teachers here are fluent in English, so they have to learn." Otherwise, students and teachers in Batam communicate through mediators, such as fellow refugee students, more fluent in Indonesian.

However, these efforts to overcome language barriers could not be applied during the pandemic due to the limitation of online learning methods. Online learning tends to limit direct student-student and student-teacher interaction, whereas refugee students require more direct assistance in adjusting to the Indonesian education system. Consequently, some refugee children in SDN 5 Lubuk Baja could not follow lessons or complete assignments despite the availability of an internet connection at their home. Many found it challenging to comprehend the assignments since their Indonesian language foundation had not been formed yet. Moreover, several lessons, such as writing traditional poems, were very localized to the point that not even their mentors could help them (Interview with IOM staff in Batam, 18 June 2022). The low compliance in submitting these assignments ultimately had implications for providing final assessments to children at the end of the school year. Some refugee parents inquired about their child's school assessment results, even though the child did not submit assignments. Therefore, the school made an affirmative policy by allowing refugee students to submit only one assignment to get their final assessment results (Interview with Headmaster of SDN 5 Lubuk Baja, 15 June 2022).

The conduct of virtual meetings also has its challenges. Headmasters of the SDN BTN Unggulan and SMA Frater in Makassar (interviewed on 23 June 2022) stated that, while refugee students were often actively involved in online learning, some had trouble with internet availability. Unlike Indonesian students, refugee students did not receive internet quota assistance from the government because they were not registered within the Basic Education Data System (*Data Pokok Pendidikan*/ Dapodik). The limited funds received by refugee parents and the resulting limited access to the internet were the main obstacles to distance learning during school closures. In dealing with the problem, the schools usually communicated with the IOM officer responsible for providing for the needs of refugees, including providing internet quotas for online learning.

Since January 2022, the government, through the Revised Joint Decision of Four Ministries regarding learning activities during the pandemic, has decided to reopen schools with the limited or partial offline learning (*pembelajaran tatap muka* - PTM) method (*see* figure 1).[8] Batam and Makassar are two regions that implemented the school reopening policy, including the schools that accommodate refugee children. When complete face-to-face learning (PTM 100%) was implemented, teachers reported that refugee children had mingled well with local children, for example, in sports activities at school. Refugee children also began to be involved in performing arts activities organized by schools. However, it turned out that only a few refugee children fluent in Bahasa Indonesia were coming back to school. Some other refugee children remained discouraged from continuing their education due to difficulties following lessons during distance learning activities (online interview with IOM staff in Batam, 18 June 2022).

Complex Environment Support

Fieldwork in Batam and Makassar revealed that fulfilling education rights for refugee children in pandemic situations required support from numerous related actors, including parents, refugee communities, teachers/schools, government, and international organizations.

1) State support: Education policy for refugee children

Indonesia still lacks a comprehensive and long-term regulatory framework to act as a guideline for ensuring refugees' rights, including education rights. Presidential Regulation Number 125/2016 concerning the Handling of Foreign Refugees is the latest refugee regulation which provides normative framework and coordinative guideline to manage the presence of refugees from abroad in Indonesia's territory. However, rights to education have not been clearly expressed in this Regulation.

The Ministry of Education revised the 2019 Circular Letter into Letter Number 30546/ A.A5/ HK.01.00/2022 on 12 May 2022. The revision contains positive progress such as permission for schools receiving refugee children to accept financial support from international agencies and elimination of the requirement for refugee children

8 This policy only applies in particular regions in Indonesia that are already in PPKM Level 1(low) and 2 (moderate) status, while fully online learning continues to apply in other regions with PPKM Level 3 (high) and 4 (very high) status.

to obtain permission from the detention center for accessing education. However, it does not specifically address difficulties faced by refugee children to access education during the pandemic, such as additional costs and adaptation challenges related to the changes of learning methods. The absence of a detailed mechanism reflects that central and local governments in Indonesia do not see themselves as responsible for refugees. Therefore, in practice, the education of refugee children is highly dependent on international organizations. Meanwhile, drawing from Arendt's (1973) argument on "a right to have rights", these children should have the right to belong to some kind of organized political community. In the context of a nation-state, refugee children should have a right to civil rights such as citizenship (Boehm, 2015). However, granting citizenship for refugees is beyond Indonesia's responsibility as a transit country and non-signatory of the Refugee Convention. Nevertheless, Indonesia can grant access to provide the fulfillment of rights for every person living in its jurisdiction in accordance with its international commitment under international human rights instruments, including CRC.

Ideally, the inclusion process of refugee children in formal schools necessitates proactive roles from multi-stakeholders (Sinandang et al, 2021) including the Ministry of Education, schools, local education offices, and international organizations with state authorities as the leading actor. Therefore, there should be a legal umbrella that can be used as a reference for responsibility sharing amongst stakeholders to cooperate in providing educational services for refugee children.

2) Role of refugee families and local communities in supporting their children to access education

In addition to the barriers to enrolment in Indonesian schools, there is a lack of support from some refugee parents to send their children to the assigned schools. Refugee parents often lack the appropriate internet connection and technological resources to support and engage with online education successfully. Refugee care organizations have not provided the required technical equipment. In some cases, language barriers among parents of refugee children have also been an obstacle in supporting the learning process, as they cannot assist their children with schoolwork. A teacher at SDN BTN Unggulan in Makassar said, "The children can speak Bahasa Indonesia, but their parents could not. So, usually the older brother helped translate the questions from the teacher." These circumstances limit parental involvement in refugee children's education. Our observation confirmed the findings of previous studies that parental support positively affected refugee and immigrant students in the United States (Bacakova, 2011; Hamilton, 2003; Portes and & Rumbaut, 2001).

Besides parents, support from teachers and schools is also needed to ensure refugee children's access to education. Teachers at schools accepting refugee children in Batam and Makassar showed their support to ensure access to education through online learning during the school closure and in-person learning after the school reopening. The presence of a school WhatsApp group enables interaction between refugees and local parents. Including refugee parents in those WhatsApp groups can also be seen as a measure of inclusiveness by local school parents towards the inclusion of refugee children in their local school. However, refugee parents rarely respond through these WhatsApp groups. Consequently, schools preferred to report any problems directly to

IOM (interview with Headmaster of SMPN 41 Batam, 15 June 2022).

Interestingly, we found that during the pandemic, the refugee community attempted to adapt to online modality by designing and offering online informal lessons for refugee children. For example, refugee-led learning initiatives in Makassar provided online learning classes. These virtual classes were even attended by refugee children in Batam, thus widening the scope of participation. It is a breakthrough in learning methods for refugees because, previously, refugee learning centers had not been established in all regions with refugee communities in Indonesia and thus the activity of refugee learning centers could only be accessed by refugees living near the learning centers (Brown, 2018).

3) Support from International Organizations: Limitation on IOM support

The pandemic highlighted IOM's limited capacity for service provision to refugees in Indonesia. According to IOM Global Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan (IOM, 2020), IOM needs to increase human resources and funding to address refugee issues during the pandemic. This is reflected in the limited services and assistance that can be provided to refugees. As a refugee in Makassar expressed:

> Before, they (IOM and UNHCR) called it an emergency situation so they gave us life support. But today we got reduced, the (amount) is down, down, and down. For education, before when the kids are not ready for school, IOM and UNHCR pushed us. They make some program, activities to integrate us with the locals and release our stress. But today, it went down, down, and down. (MM, Interviewed on 22 June 2022)

When we talked to IOM staff in Makassar, they admitted that they lowered the amount of activities due to the pandemic restriction. However, IOM attempted to maintain the progress to encourage education for refugees as:

> Most of the activities are still running but we change the modalities, so the classes are running, even some training, education…., we tried to maintain the communication. For phone, they have it, they can afford it by themselves, we don't provide that. Some people can afford laptops. For education we provide internet data. (IOM Makassar's staff, 21 June 2022)

Despite these efforts, some refugee parents remained hesitant to send their children to schools because additional expenses for supporting children to go to schools, including transport costs, could not be covered by existing monthly allowances from the IOM. They expressed that:

> Everything is becoming more expensive, but the allowance is the same and we cannot work. Moreover, prior to the pandemic, it used to be that kids over 19 years old would get adult allowance with the same amount as their parents (around Rp.1.250.000, -/ USD 79). But, now (in 2021) kids over 19 years old still get children allowance (around Rp.500.000, -/ USD 32), only their babah and mamah get Rp.1.250.000. (AJ, Interviewed on 22 June 2022).

While this decreasing allowance is the impact of Australian government budget cuts to IOM (Misbach, 2018), the pandemic has made the reduction in aid even more pronounced for refugees with school-aged children.

Fluctuate Motivation

Motivation of refugee children to continue accessing education is vital in guaranteeing the completion of their studies. Two crucial factors affect refugee children's motivation: local students' receptiveness and school teachers' language ability. Both factors must be present in the child's learning to ensure the stability of the refugee children's motivation. Otherwise, refugee children are prone to experience demotivation, leading them to stop accessing education.

Several success stories prove the importance of both factors. In Batam, a Somali girl named Serene (pseudonym) was one of 14 children enrolled by IOM to SDN 2 Lubuk Baja at the beginning of 2020. However, she was the only refugee child who remained to join the learning activities and managed to advance to the next grade in 2022. Initially, Serene's parents did not support her in going to school over fears local children would not accept her due to racial differences. Nevertheless, Serene's persistence and the fact that her local friends were helping her with school matters convinced them to support her education (Interview with Serene's parents, 15 June 2022). Unlike many other refugee children, Serene is fluent in Bahasa Indonesia. Based on short conservation during observation (15 June 2022), Serene reports that her school friends were kind and helped her learn Bahasa Indonesia and understand lessons at school.

In Makassar, an Afghan boy named Jamal (pseudonym) was one of eight refugee children currently enrolled in SMA Frater. Jamal and his father were previously denied by three to four schools due to unclear mechanisms for accepting refugees before eventually being accepted at SMA Frater. Jamal still wants to study there, although it is about 30 minutes on foot from his accommodation (Interview with Jamal, 23 June 2022). In the first term of his school, Jamal experienced online learning. However, he found it easier to quickly adapt to the learning method with the help of his friends. His friends also said they were encouraged to help because Jamal actively asked questions in English and Bahasa Indonesia. When offline learning was in place, Jamal flourished as he joined the school's futsal team, which won the futsal competition between high schools in Makassar. The teacher even wanted to register him for a science competition but could not do so because of Jamal's status as a refugee.

Meanwhile, Shila (pseudonym), a Bangladeshi refugee who also enrolled in SMA Frater high school with Jamal, did not experience the same thing. Her "lost learning" period in Indonesia had made it difficult for her to follow lessons at SMA Frater. Moreover, she had problems asking for help with her lessons because she found that her questions were too many and irritated her classmates. She felt deadlocked as her teachers also told her to ask her friends for assistance. As a result, Shila found it challenging to make friends. Ultimately, she failed the class because her language ability was insufficient to continue to a higher class. When Shila was asked about what kind of education she thought more suitable for her, she replied:

> I am almost 18 years old now, so something practical will be helpful rather than normal classes. If I want to study, I have to start from the basics, and I don't have any basics, [after] almost 10 years here [(in Indonesia)] I have none. But, practical, I can understand. Something like nursing courses, it is good. Or photography. I will be grateful for something like working classes for my future job so if I go to another country, I can apply for a job like that. (Interview in 22 June 2022)

The different experiences between Jamal and Shila show that the motivation of refugee children to stay in school is not the same across children. Motivation can fluctuate, and strong impulses on continuing education can be weakened when refugee children have language difficulties and problems blending in with their schoolmates.

CONCLUSION

This study has scrutinized Indonesia's commitment to providing access to education for refugee children before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. While formal education was for many years not clearly regulated for refugee children, unexpectedly during the pandemic (when most schools were heavily affected by the lockdowns and the requirement for online teaching), the Indonesian government became more receptive to granting refugee children access to formal education. This progress is possible due to the issuance of a Circular Letter in 2019 that provides common grounds among local authorities to formally accommodate refugee children in schools. However, by examining practices of refugee children's education in Batam and Makassar, this study has demonstrated that the pandemic has compounded challenges for realizing access to education for refugee children. These challenges can be seen through the four elements of accessibility that constitute a prerequisite for the fulfillment of children's educational rights: information availability, learning process, environmental support, and refugee children's motivation. Despite the existing challenges, the pandemic has also led to new adaptation strategies for refugee children by utilizing technology to enable access to education. Despite initial problems with the implementation of these changes and the ongoing dependency on international agencies for refugee children education, this provision of access to education may potentially signal a wider change in refugee treatment in Indonesia, affecting rights provisions other than education.

The analysis of these elements also has shown the importance of cooperation among stakeholders involved in providing education services for refugee children. This cooperation enables the continuance of enrolling refugee children in formal education despite the existing limitations. More comprehensive access to education for refugee children necessitates the role of four actors with appropriate actions. First, refugee children and their communities should be empowered to socially adapt to the existing situation while proactively seeking for educational access. Second, the receiving community, primarily local schools, should express positive receptiveness to ensure inclusive education for refugee children despite the difficulties of dealing with changing education practices during the pandemic. Third, the national and local governments must provide a regulatory framework to enable refugee children's

access to educational services so that it aligns with Indonesia's national interest and global commitment. Fourth, international organizations should maintain their partnership with the Indonesian government in facilitating communication with the refugees while also assisting with the operational requirements of the refugees.

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DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.