HPG working paper

Exploring Karen refugee youths' aspirations and wellbeing amidst protracted displacement in Thailand

Charlotte Hill, Hayso Thako, Thà Shêê, Ta Thà Moo, Nant Susan Htoo and Eh T'Mwee

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The Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)'s work is directed by our Integrated Programme (IP), a multi-year body of research spanning a range of issues, countries and emergencies, allowing us to examine critical issues facing humanitarian policy and practice, and influence key debates in the sector. This paper is part of HPG's People, power and agency IP. The authors would like to thank HPG's IP donors whose funding enables us to pursue the research agenda.

About the authors

ORCID numbers are given where available. Please click on the ID icon next to an author's name in order to access their ORCID listing.

Dr Charlotte Hill teaches media and cultural studies, and visual cultures in the Department of Media Arts and Design, Chiang Mai University.

Hayso Thako is a PhD candidate and currently holds the position of Education and Livelihood Coordinator at the Karen Refugee Committee.

Thà Shêê is an independent researcher and coordinator at PlayOnside, in Mae Sot, Thailand.

Ta Thà Moo is a passionate teacher in Nu Po camp and an independent researcher.

Nant Susan Htoo is a dedicated teacher based in Mae La refugee camp, a passionate refugee activist, independent researcher, and current president of the Karen Youth Organisation.

Eh T'Mwee is an experienced educator in Mae La Refugee Camp, specialising in computer basics and history.

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Acronyms

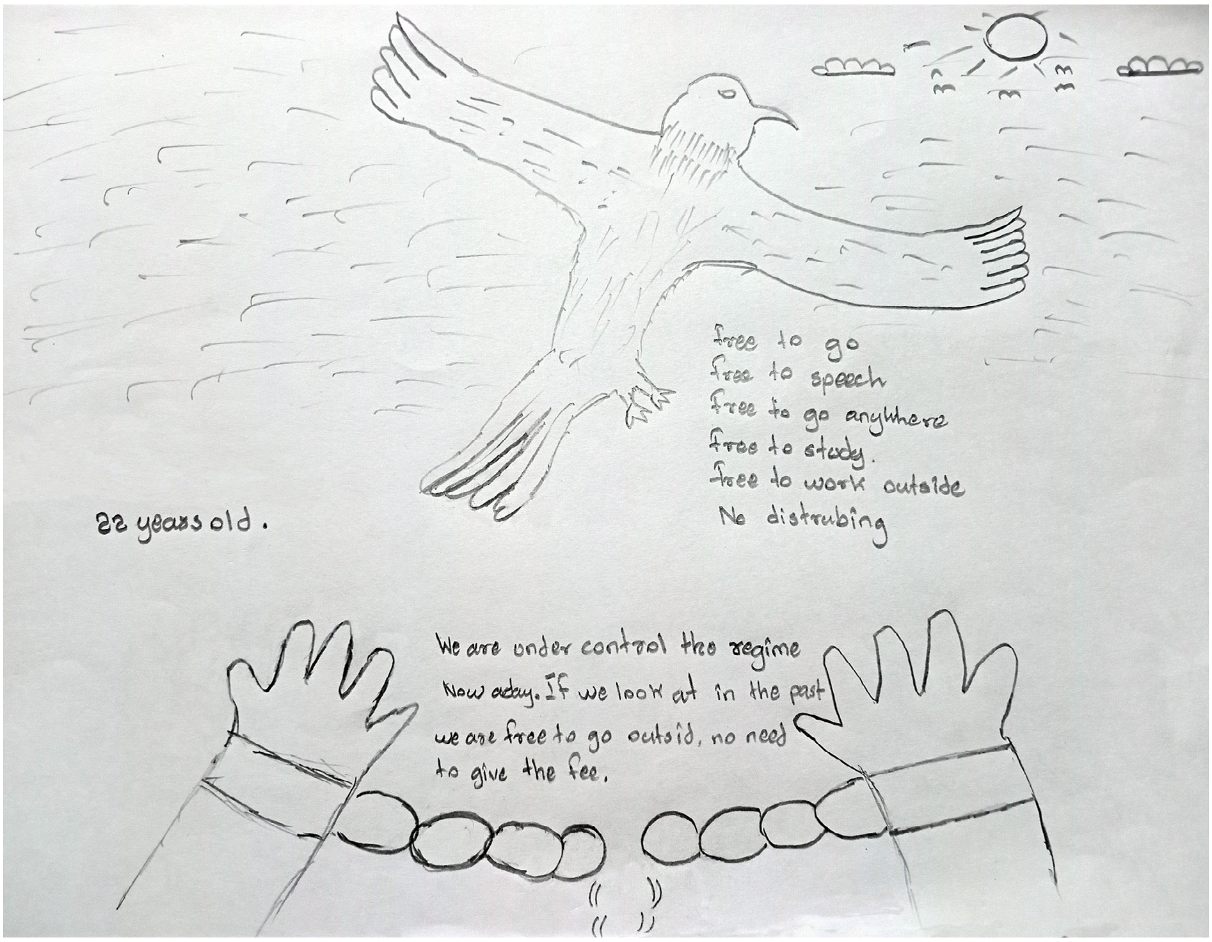
HPG	Humanitarian Policy Group
IOM	International Organization for Migration
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
KRC	Karen Refugee Committee
KRCEE	Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity
KWO	Karen Women's Organisation
KYO	Karen Youth Organisation
NGO	non-governmental organisation
TBC	The Border Consortium
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations Refugee Agency
US	United States
WASH	water, sanitation and hygiene

1 Introduction

Regardless of the extraordinary circumstances refugees may find themselves in, human beings seek not just to live but to do so in ways they believe have meaning and value. In this respect, the challenging aspects of people's lives that underpin these efforts – the subjective, the social, the moral and the material components of things – exist on a continuum and are hard to separate from each other. In public policy, this set of concerns has been discussed using the language of 'wellbeing', a shorthand used to describe the processes involved in people's efforts to live 'good' lives that they believe have value, along with efforts by policy actors to measure and influence them (Lough et al., 2023).

By contrast, humanitarian assistance emphasises short-term, 'life-saving' assistance aimed mainly at supporting people's material conditions to alleviate suffering and prevent death during a moment of acute crisis. However, crises are rarely one-off events and can drag on for years, if not decades. People can also be displaced multiple times. In these protracted circumstances, humanitarian aid tends to evolve from a one-off intervention at a fixed point in time into an open-ended system of governance (albeit a partial and fragmented one) that, while concerned with the wellbeing and needs of the populations it serves, also exercises significant power and control over them (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Participant drawing of future imaginings, Mae La camp



free to go
free to speech
free to go anywhere
free to study.
free to work outside
No distrubing

We are under control the regime
Now aday. If we look at in the past
we are free to go outsid, no need
to give the fee.

This paper is one of two case studies contributing to a research project exploring people's pursuit of wellbeing in protracted humanitarian crises, carried out by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at ODI. It focuses on the experiences of Karen refugee youth from Burma/Myanmar living in long-established camps on the Thai side of the border. It explores what aspects of life Karen youth deem important in pursuing their wellbeing, and how far these priorities align with those of the humanitarian actors that support them.

Encamped refugee youth in Thailand were selected as an example of a population that could inform understanding of long-term, inter-generational aspects of wellbeing in protracted crises (see Box 1). As camps in this setting have operated for nearly four decades, they present a unique space where young people in particular have only known protracted displacement and have grown up witnessing changing circumstances in the camps and for their community at large over time. The 2021 military coup by Burma/Myanmar armed forces has added an additional layer to this picture by dramatically reshaping prospects for return as well as driving new displacements, further complicating how Karen – both refugees and those supporting them – understand their wellbeing in the present and make plans for the future. Thailand was also selected as a crisis context in which local refugee committees play a significant role in delivering assistance to the refugees both inside and outside camps. This follows on from findings in the project's literature review on the potential link between local leadership, wellbeing and agency in contrast to more top-down, externally driven approaches. Finally, the long-term nature of encampment in this context also allows for an exploration of how experiences of camp life interact with broader issues related to migration and refugees along the Thailand–Burma/Myanmar border.

Box 1 Young people and wellbeing in protracted crises

The experiences and agency of young people are especially relevant to exploring life beyond survival in protracted displacement. As several studies have highlighted, the disruptions caused by crises and displacement can have an outsized impact on people's specific experience of youth, which is a unique transition period in people's lives. Here, immediate and acute challenges faced in the present – such as exposure to violence, experiences of trauma, or disruption to education – can have far-reaching effects on the longer-term wellbeing of both individuals and wider societies. At the same time, young people's efforts to imagine and strive for a meaningful future as they move towards adulthood can feed back into serious risks in the here-and-now, such as exposure to harmful and exploitative work environments when seeking a better life beyond the confinement of camps; mental health challenges; substance abuse; or recruitment into armed groups when alternative futures seem closed off and inaccessible (e.g., Hoban et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2021; IDMC, 2022).

Especially relevant here is the question of agency and voice. While this is particularly important for young people making the transition from dependence in childhood to states of independence or interdependence with others, it is often overlooked by humanitarian actors, who tend to approach young people – if they distinguish them from other crisis-affected people at all – in terms of the risks and vulnerabilities they face, as opposed to their agency and capabilities. This is especially problematic when social norms in many settings already actively exclude young people from decision-making and taking a meaningful part in public life. It becomes even more so in protracted displacement settings, where young people's interests and perceptions of what matters may often sharply diverge from others', with differential experiences of crisis and displacement 'expos[ing] tensions across generations about how to understand the past and how to prepare for a different future' (Feldman, 2018: 158).

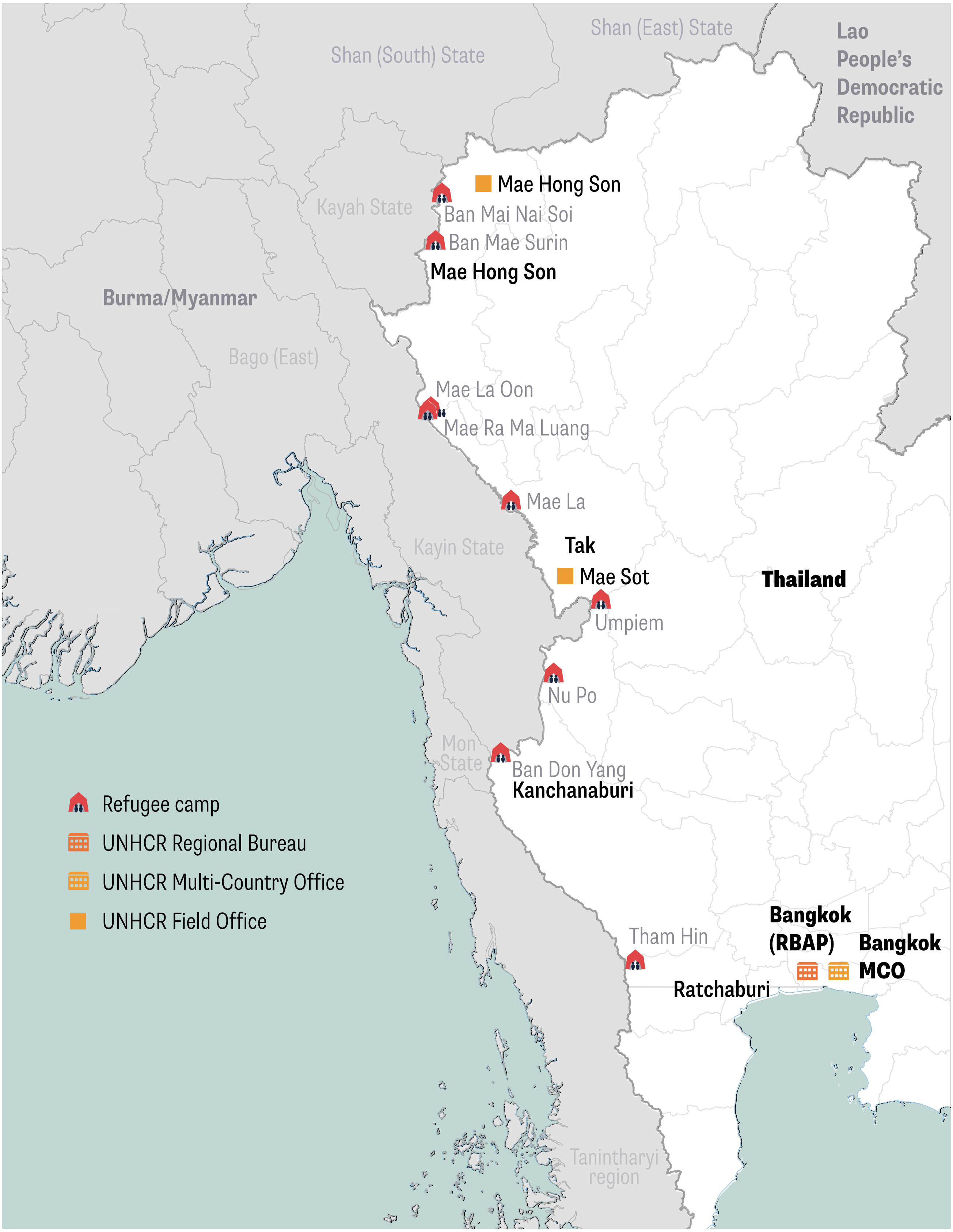
1.1 Methodology

In seeking to explore the terrain of what matters 'beyond survival' in protracted crisis settings, this project uses the language of 'wellbeing' ('Oh-Mu-So-Per' in S'gaw Karen, 'Aw Sue Aw Ba' in Pwo Karen) to think about and discuss how Karen between the ages of 18 and 35 living in two camps along the Thailand–Burma/Myanmar border live meaningful lives in protracted displacement. We understand wellbeing holistically and focus on three main areas: the material (food, income and commodities), the subjective (how people interpret their material needs) and the relational (interaction with others and what they value).

Through an ethnographic lens, this study takes a bottom-up approach, drawing from the voices of young, encamped individuals living in two refugee camps along the Thailand–Burma/Myanmar border. Our research centred on four key questions. We first examined the aspects of life that affected populations deemed important. Second, we investigated how these priorities aligned with what humanitarian actors considered essential. Third, we explored the impact of the recent coup d'état in Burma/Myanmar and how, if at all, this has affected the participants' relationships with aid providers in Thailand. Last, we sought to determine whether the participants were living a life of mere survival (i.e., in terms of biological needs only) or if they were living beyond this and, if so, in what ways.

Grounding these primary questions in a literature review that contextualises wellbeing concerning encampment and protracted displacement, we focus on what it means to live beyond basic human needs. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) (2016) defines basic human needs in terms of 'access to basic services and assistance in health, nutrition, WASH [water, sanitation and hygiene], food, shelter, energy, education, as well as domestic items and specialised services for people with specific needs'. For refugees in protracted displacement, such as those living in Mae La and Nu Po (Figure 2), UNHCR extends the definition to include 'long-term wellbeing'. This framework includes 'needs related to protection, sustainable livelihoods, and solutions' (UNHCR, 2016: 1). The 'solutions' UNHCR refers to are so-called 'durable solutions' consisting of voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement. Thus, this study investigates to what extent, if at all, young, encamped Karen live to and beyond these definitions.

Figure 2 Map of refugee camps in Thailand


Shan (East) State
Lao People's Democratic Republic
Shan (South) State
Mae Hong Son
Kayah State
Ban Mai Nai Soi
Ban Mae Surin
Mae Hong Son
Burma/Myanmar
Bago (East)
Mae La Oon
Mae Ra Ma Luang
Mae La
Kayin State
Tak
Mae Sot
Thailand
Umpiem
Nu Po
Mon State
Ban Don Yang
Kanchanaburi
Refugee camp
UNHCR Regional Bureau
UNHCR Multi-Country Office
UNHCR Field Office
Tham Hin
Bangkok (RBAP)
Bangkok MCO
Ratchaburi
Tanintharyi region

Source: UNHCR, 2023

Research was carried out in Mae La and Nu Po camps – two of the nine refugee camps along the Thailand–Burma/Myanmar border (see Figure 2). Both fall under the jurisdiction of Thailand's Tak province, and both have been in operation for more than 25 years. With a combined population exceeding 43,000, we selected these two camps because they account for just under 50% of the total camp population along the border. Both camps have a diverse population (religion, age, ethnicity) with multiple generations living under one roof.

We focused on Karen between 18 and 35 years old who had been born in the camp or brought to the camp as young children.[1] Our sample aimed for an equal split between men and women. The 60 individuals and four focus groups were selected through canvassing and snowball sampling. Ethical guidelines were followed, including informed consent, confidentiality assurance and pseudonyms for anonymity. Twenty interviews with humanitarian actors and stakeholders enriched the dataset. Individuals included operational workers and middle managers. All in-depth interviews were carried out in each participant's preferred language.

The research team, led by two principal investigators and four research assistants, leveraged their long-standing connections to the camps. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, drawings and observations from within the camps. A pilot study validated the interview protocol, while subsequent training workshops facilitated by the principal investigators and ODI were conducted for data analysis and theme identification.

Conducting research in conflict-affected and densely populated areas posed various challenges and limitations. Ongoing conflict restricted the mobility of researchers, with one assistant being denied permission to attend a workshop, highlighting individuals' limited access to resources. Overcrowded living conditions made finding private interview spaces difficult, necessitating strategies to ensure participant privacy. Community suspicion due to past experiences created resistance to door-to-door sampling; this was addressed by gradually building trust through a respected community member's introduction. The snowball sampling approach aimed to ensure diverse views among young Karen, albeit not randomly.

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[1] Within the different Karen cultures, youths range from 15 to 35 years old. Considering the cultural, social, and political factors that shape encamped lives and ethical considerations when working with young people, for all purposes, this study explores the lived experiences of Karen youths between the ages of 18 and 35.

2 Background: Karen refugees along the Thailand–Burma/Myanmar border in context

The total population of the Karen ethnic group has been a subject of long-standing debate. Despite being the third-largest ethnic group in current-day Burma/Myanmar, following the Bama and Shan, estimations of their population vary widely, ranging from three to six million (Mendiolaza, 2018). However, as South (2011, 10) highlights, the actual size of the Karen population remains uncertain, as no reliable census has been conducted in Burma/Myanmar since 1948 (the end of the colonial period).

Linguistically, the Karen speak languages distinct from the majority Burmese. The Karen population's diversity is reflected in their name, political involvement, attire, religious beliefs and language. Notably, there is no single word across Karen languages to express the concept of Karen unity. The term 'Karen' itself is an anglicisation of the Burmese 'Kayin', the etymology of which is disputed (Cheesman, 2002: 202). While various sub-groups exist within the Karen community, the major ones are recognised as Pwo, S'gaw, and Bwe or Kayah.

2.1 Historical conflict and ongoing rebellion

The roots of the conflict between the Karen and Burma's armed forces (and current military regime) – the Tatmadaw – date back to the Second World War when the Karen and Burmese found themselves on opposing sides. While the Karen allied with British colonial forces, Burmese nationalists aligned with the Japanese. This divergence in loyalties sowed the seeds for enduring tensions (Eh Htoo and Waters, forthcoming; Myint-U, 2020). After gaining independence from the United Kingdom in 1948, political disputes escalated between Karen leaders and the Burmese government. The newly formed government refused to recognise the supposed Karen sovereignty promised by the departing British and viewed the Karen as a threat to national unity. The 1948 Christmas massacre of Karen churchgoers by the Sitwundan (Union Police Special Reserves) (Buchanan, 2016) ignited the Karen rebellion, which persists to this day (Eh Htoo and Waters, forthcoming; Mirante, 1994; South, 2008; Myint-U, 2020).

Since 1949, Karen villages and civilians have endured targeted attacks and constant threats from Myanmar's army, resulting in tens of thousands of people seeking safety across the Thailand–Burma/Myanmar border. Among the ethnic groups opposing Myanmar's army, the Karen National Union (KNU) and its armed wing the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), established in 1949, are significant and influential. It is highly organised, controlling significant Karen and neighbouring territories and maintaining independent military forces. The protracted conflict has led to an influx of Karen refugees into Thailand, where they have established their own education system, tracing its roots back to the British colonial era.

Myanmar’s apparent journey towards democratic reform and political transition began in early 2010, with the country’s first national election in two decades. The KNU played a pivotal role by signing a bilateral ceasefire agreement in January 2012, followed by the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement with the Burmese military government in 2015. However, despite these ceasefire agreements, progress in political negotiations remained limited and was effectively halted by the February 2021 coup d’état.

Tensions escalated in 2017 when Myanmar’s army, without KNU consent, expanded road construction into KNU-controlled areas. The situation worsened in 2018 as Myanmar’s army increased militarisation, violating the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement by conducting patrols and fortifying camps. Recent actions by Myanmar’s army in Karen State include airstrikes, artillery bombardments, house burnings and extending patrols into previously safe areas (Sullivan, 2021; Kapur, 2022). This increased violence breaches international law and poses a significant security threat to local villagers, resulting in mass displacement.

The 2021 military coup d’état, led by General Min Aung Hlaing, triggered nationwide protests that united various sectors of Burma/Myanmar society. Workers, miners, lawyers, health workers, artists, students, teachers and citizens in both urban and rural areas participated in demonstrations and civil disobedience (Brooten, 2021; Thazin, 2021). In response to the military’s use of deadly force against protesters, some demonstrators took up arms and established the People’s Defence Forces with guidance and support from ethnic armed organisations including the KNLA.

Since the 2021 coup d’état, Myanmar’s army has conducted clearance operations in Karen State, utilising ground artillery and conducting airstrikes, resulting in widespread displacement. Consequently, farmers in the region have been unable to cultivate or harvest their crops, raising concerns about future rice shortages. Ongoing airstrikes have instilled fear among villagers, preventing them from returning home. Women and children living near the border have sought refuge on the Thai side to escape constant threats (KHRG, 2022). The violence in Karen State has significantly affected those in the refugee camps, making return near impossible.

2.2 Temporary shelters and self-governance

Not a signatory to the United Nations (UN) Refugee Convention, Thailand designates Mae La and Nu Po as temporary shelters and not as refugee camps. However, the government allows people to stay provided humanitarian organisations offer assistance (Song, 2015). In accordance with the UNHCR’s definition of a refugee camp, this report will refer to them as refugee camps. Before opening these camps, the Karen people had, for several decades, been retreating from Myanmar’s army and crossing the border.

Initially, 52 designated refugee camps were spread across six provinces along the Thailand–Burma/Myanmar border (Saw Robert Htwe, Chairperson of Karen Refugee Committee, personal correspondence, 2023). Over time, these camps were consolidated into four main provinces. For decades, these camps have provided shelter to over 150,000 refugees from Burma/Myanmar.

Refugees within the camps organise and govern themselves, electing camp leaders every three years. Five primary para-governmental programmes cover health, livelihood, education, social affairs and camp management. The Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) leaders oversee the daily operations of the camp. In line with this self-governance, refugees also operate and manage the education system, with teachers recruited from within the camps and trained under the guidance of the Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE). The refugee education system is primarily rooted in Karen traditions.

2.3 Assistance, resettlement and return

In Thailand, The Border Consortium (TBC) has been assisting refugees who have fled conflict in Burma/Myanmar since 1984. TBC provides essential services in the nine refugee camps, including food assistance, nutrition support, shelter and settlement programmes, community agriculture initiatives, entrepreneurship development, community management and preparedness programmes, and emergency response (TBC, 2023).

Starting in 2005, UNHCR initiated a mass resettlement programme for refugees in the camps. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) supports the refugee resettlement programme (IOM, 2023), claiming that over 120,000 refugees have resettled in 14 countries, with the United States (US) receiving the largest number.

Following elections in 2010, UNHCR also began planning for refugee returns from Burma/Myanmar to Thailand. However, prior to the coup, only around 1,000 refugees had been supported by its ‘facilitated returns’ programme, while a further 15,000 were estimated to have returned spontaneously. During this period, international donors began to curtail their support for refugee populations in Thailand; long-standing governance and service provision arrangements began to contract significantly, with TBC alone reportedly experiencing a 50% funding cut between 2012 and 2016. At the same time, donor funding for development and peace activities on the Burma/Myanmar side of the border expanded significantly. According to recent research, many refugees in Thailand experienced these shifts as a growing build-up of pressure to return, feeding into a Myanmar-army-led narrative of democratic transition of which the refugees remained deeply sceptical (McKonnachie, 2022). As the coup has subsequently demonstrated, these beliefs were well founded.

3 Social and cultural aspects of everyday life and wellbeing

This chapter illuminates the intricate relationship between wellbeing and culture within the confines of Mae La and Nu Po. The young people in these camps, like their peers worldwide, derive wellbeing from the social fabric of everyday life, emphasising the importance of considering wellbeing as a socially and culturally constructed concept. While the recreational spaces in these camps serve as vital outlets for physical activity, social interaction and a sense of normality, they also highlight the challenges of restricted mobility and limited resources that young people face. Furthermore, the decline in cultural activities, such as traditional events and practices, underscores the delicate balance between preserving cultural heritage and adapting to changing circumstances. As these young refugees navigate the complexities of camp life, they demonstrate resilience, creativity, and a determination to find meaning and wellbeing within the ordinary and often overlooked aspects of their existence, offering valuable insights for humanitarian actors and policy-makers seeking to support their holistic development.

Central to this chapter are the following questions:

- What aspects of life do young people in protracted crises deem important in the pursuit of their wellbeing, and how aligned are the priorities of the aid providers in meeting the individual's needs?
- How and why do these priorities change in the challenging milieu of protracted crisis settings?
- What strategies, networks, resources, or other means do individuals utilise in their pursuit of personal wellbeing amidst adversity?

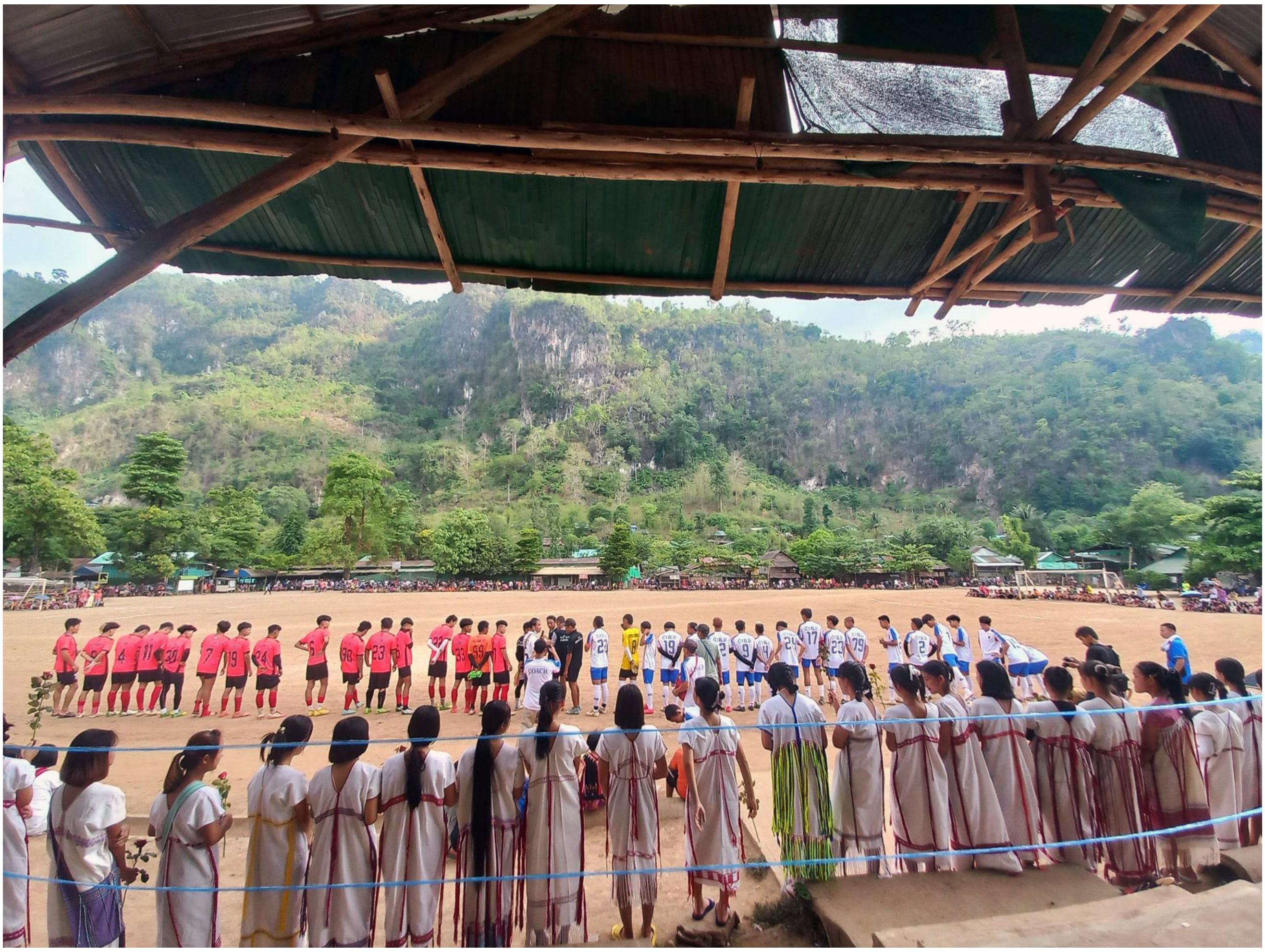
Young people's priorities are not static but continually shaped by the dynamic nature of protracted crisis and displacement. We acknowledge that while some individuals utilise diverse tools to craft purposeful lives beyond mere survival, others struggle to establish a sense of purpose within the context of their encampment. While many of our participants find meaning in various aspects of their lives – including religion, music, politics, education, work and their future aspirations – this chapter will specifically delve into the themes of culture, togetherness, relationships, collective experiences, communities and social spaces, all within the context of sport, special events, weaving, religion and engaging with the natural world.

Like young people worldwide, wellbeing is found in the social aspects of everyday life. White argues that wellbeing should be regarded as 'socially and culturally constructed' and 'something that belongs to and emerges from relationships with others' (White, 2016: 29). From socialising with friends and family to playing sports and expressing themselves through cultural practices such as special events and weaving, the young of Mae La and Nu Po find meaning within the ordinary and often overlooked aspects of life.

3.1 Sports: enhancing wellbeing

In a bounded space such as a refugee camp, where physical mobility is restricted, recreational areas are crucial for nurturing wellbeing, community, empowerment and resilience among young, encamped refugees. In Mae La and Nu Po, dedicated spaces are kept for recreational activities and events (Figure 3). The significance of open spaces as a mental health-enhancing activity is widely acknowledged (Wiseman and Sadlo, 2015; Millican et al., 2019; Gagnon, 2021). These areas provide a valuable counterbalance to the scarcity of public and private spaces and the narrowness of the streets that weave through the camps.

Figure 3 Weekly football competition in a dedicated recreational field, Mae La camp



Photograph: Nant Susan Htoo

In their research in a camp in northern Iraq, Millican et al. (2019) argued that camp planning and space are crucial for personal peace and wellbeing and for fostering a sense of togetherness among families and communities. The authors further asserted that gardens and green spaces offer physical advantages through outdoor exercise, promote community bonding by facilitating group activities, reduce stress, enhance resilience and hold value as a means of activity and occupational therapy in trauma recovery (Millican et al., 2019: 352).

Similar to the findings from Millican et al. (2019), in the context of the camp committees, recreational areas in Mae La and Nu Po are safeguarded against development to ensure their availability for special celebrations and sports events. This is a clear example of how far individual priorities align with what humanitarian actors deem essential. It is worth noting that the football ground in Mae La camp holds a special cultural significance as it is named after a former camp leader, Pu Go Lay, whose love for sports not only created a legacy in the camp's history but also embodies the ongoing wellbeing of the encamped youths.

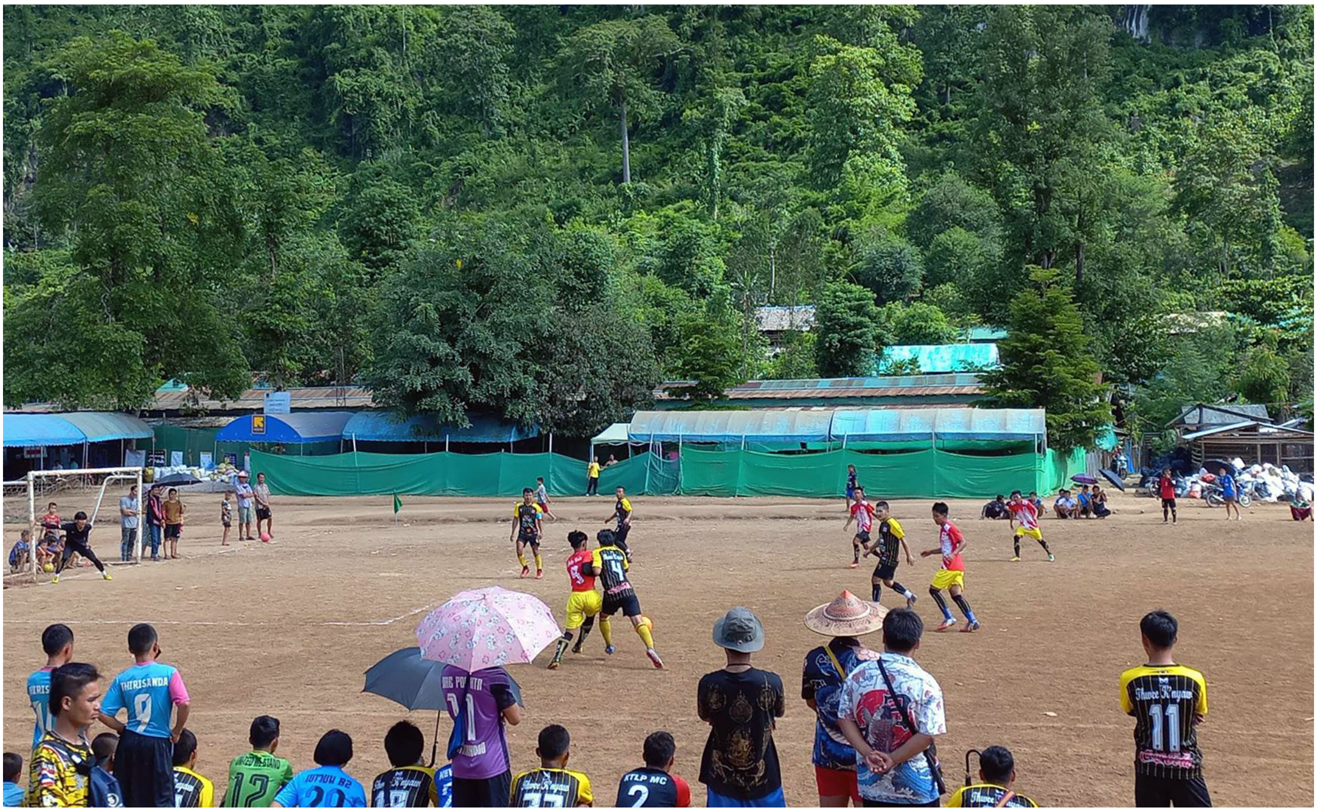
The majority of our male participants expressed that they find meaning within sports. The pursuit of wellbeing, often described by our participants as 'happiness', was found in collective activities, such as playing football or cane ball – a non-competitive game to pass a ball 'creatively' between players without using their hands (the national sport of Myanmar) – with friends. As Lik Yun from Nu Po camp explained, sport is fundamental to his mental and physical health. Saw Note Note from Mae La agrees: 'I like to play football and cane ball when I have free time. I feel good because many friends play, and we make fun of each other. Whether we win or lose, we play it for our health'. Saw Gay Ler said that the recreational ground in Mae La is used to hold football competitions, usually arranged by one of the youth organisations. He said he has gotten to 'know more people' by playing football in the evenings. For him, it was a way to build community and have fun.

To some extent, participants could escape the pressures of living in the camp by playing sports, as in the case of our male participants; however, these events also attracted many of our female participants who would hang out with friends and cheer on their favourite team (as seen in Figure 3). Having fun was essential to our participants' wellbeing, which the recreational space and football provided. Fincham argues, 'fun is escaping present concerns or anxieties. During fun, attention is directed away from responsibility towards a more carefree attitude—however short-lived that may be' (Fincham, 2016: 42).

However, even though both camps have dedicated spaces for recreational usage, these spaces also highlight the challenges the youths face due to their restricted mobility and limited resources. It further illuminated how these challenges can affect the quality of the sports experience and togetherness. Saw Note Note comments that because Mae La is overcrowded, people seek out space and use the recreational ground in the evenings, which becomes crowded. He says: 'If people outside the camp could see us, they would probably say that these people are hungry for sports' (Figure 4). James from Mae La describes the lack of opportunity to leave the camp or invite friends in to play:

> There are some opportunities to play. We can play inside the camp, but if our friends from outside the camp call us, we cannot join them. We are refugees; we don't have money to go, and we don't have a card to go out. We don't have any identity.

Figure 4 Mae La recreational field



Photograph: Nant Susan Htoo

Demonstrating a partial alignment between aid providers and young people's needs in the camps, Right to Play recognises the importance of sports and physical activities and has consistently supported various initiatives. Its assistance has included providing sports equipment, delivering professional training and coaching, However, the inability to venture beyond the camp gates poses a significant hurdle for these youths to pursue their sports interests at a professional level. Thus, sports primarily serve as a source of enjoyment and companionship rather than a pathway to professional development.

Another important component of Right to Play's approach is an effort to empower young individuals to aspire beyond their limited space and opportunities. This aligns with participants' reflections linking participating in sports to a sense of representation and voice. Through their prominent presence at the recreation ground, young people become visible as a unique demographic within the camp. This is especially true when they are able to take part in activities beyond camp boundaries, where they become representatives of the Karen community in their interactions with the outside world.

Due to funding constraints, Right to Play ceased its support in the camps as of December 2022. Unfortunately, this decision has presented challenges, particularly for refugee youths who often lack the necessary documents to engage in activities outside the camp. According to James from Mae La, the withdrawal of support has significantly impacted communication and relationship-building between young refugees and their local Thai counterparts, negatively affecting his wellbeing.

Although the withdrawal of support has negatively affected our participants, the recreational spaces nevertheless serve as an essential outlet for the encamped youths by offering physical activity, social interaction and a sense of normality. The recreational spaces also demonstrate how the camp authorities, such as the Karen camp committee, actively plan areas within the camps for the community's wellbeing. However, the spaces also reaffirm the youths' refugee status, immobility, lack of resources and opportunities, and the challenging environment they must navigate to find meaning and wellbeing within ordinary activities. Aid providers, such as Right to Play, significantly contributed to the community's wellbeing and provided resources that helped the young live beyond survival. Their withdrawal highlights the impact on the community and individuals' wellbeing when funding is restricted.

3.2 The importance of cultural events in camp life

The recreational grounds in both camps serve as venues not only for sports activities but also for special events such as Refugee Day, Karen New Year and the annual wrist-tying ceremony (see Section 3.1). In Mae La, events such as Karen New Year were a valuable opportunity to celebrate and showcase the youths' rich heritage. However, according to Hill (2021), the elders in the camp were concerned that young people had lost their sense of a so-called Karen-ness and cultural heritage. This concern was further expressed by a few of our participants. They stated that special events were in decline, which meant a loss of culture. For example, Saw Bua from Mae La posited that wellbeing was found in the community's cultural practices. When asked if he thought young Karen people still valued their culture, he replied, 'I haven't seen much traditional Karen culture lately'. Saw Bua goes on to state that in addition to the events on the recreational ground, in the past, there was a dedicated cultural office that showcased items such as the Karen harp, pick and mandolin. However, since the owner of the instruments left for a third country, these instruments are no longer available: 'They've all almost vanished because there's no one to keep running the office.' He goes on to claim that for the wellbeing of the Karen nation, the youths must preserve Karen literature and cultural arts:

> If those cultures cease to exist, our Karen tribes will also cease to exist. We must do everything possible to support and preserve Karen national art and culture. We must work tirelessly to ensure that the next generation of youth sees it.

Saw Eh Wah also feels that there are fewer cultural celebrations in Mae La. Reminiscing, he stated, 'I saw many performances like singing competitions, drama, plays, and storytelling, and some people played the mandolin'. He observed that since 2018, these events are no longer held in the same way. The change, he believed, was first due to power relations between the Thai authorities and the inhabitants: 'The authorities no longer allow it, fearing that it will become a big problem'. He also noted that even if they wanted to hold a large event, the number of participants and Karen leader support has decreased.

Saw Bua and Saw Eh Wah's observations regarding the decline in cultural activities accurately highlight the direct relationship between the camp authorities and the camp residents. In Mae La camp, a cultural committee was established in 2007–2008 under the former camp leader, who actively worked to preserve and promote Karen culture. The camp committee also funded cultural performances during the New Year celebrations. However, since the former leader's resettlement to a third country and other cultural committee members left the camp, there is no longer anyone specific to organise such cultural activities as before.

In 2023, cultural activities within the camp are primarily driven by the camp residents' initiative, with basic support from the camp committee. Highlighting where, perhaps, priorities between the camp residents and the authorities and aid providers do not align, it is essential to note that no specific funding is received from outside organisations for these activities.

Compared with Mae La, participants from Nu Po have not seen a significant change in how the events are held or how cultural practices are expressed. This could be because the camp is much smaller, more isolated and slower to adapt to outside influences. Say Ber Htoo articulates deep affection for the events, highlighting the presence of traditional dance, music and poetry competitions. When asked about the impact of these events on his wellbeing, he emphasised how the Karen New Year unifies the community. Similarly, Kada Gay and Kho Gyi Paw admitted their lack of understanding regarding the events' political or cultural significance. Yet, they enthusiastically participate to foster a sense of 'togetherness' and wellbeing within the community.

Events within Mae La and Nu Po are overseen and arranged by Karen organisations inside the camps, including youth, women and religious groups. Aid organisations generally do not provide funds for these events unless directly related to their work or project activities. The Karen Youth Organisation (KYO), for example, predominantly organises events where money is raised from the participants, and donations are given from the Karen community (inside and outside the camps). This demonstrates how the youths navigate the restrictions placed on them by finding ways to survive beyond what the formal humanitarian sector provides.

3.3 Passing down tradition: the role of weaving in Nu Po camp

While cultural events play a significant role in maintaining Karen traditions within Mae La and Nu Po, it is important to recognise the day-to-day cultural practices, such as the deep-rooted connection to weaving, that hold distinct meanings for many encamped refugees. This was evident in our interviews with young women of Nu Po; but although weaving symbolises Karen identity, heritage and resilience (Mantei, 2012; Stephenson et al., 2013), none of our Mae La participants mentioned the cultural practice regarding their wellbeing. This speaks back to Saw Bua and Saw Eh Wah's concern surrounding the loss of cultural heritage in Mae La and the need for preservation.

As an act of togetherness for our participants from Nu Po, weaving is passed down through generations; as Naw Toh Poe explained, 'I'm happy when I get to share what I know with other people. For example, some children here don't know how to sew or weave, but I can teach them'. For Naw Toh Poe, weaving represents the preservation of tradition and the expression of her unique cultural narratives. It further shows how locally led initiatives align with what many young women in Nu Po camp want in their pursuit of wellbeing.

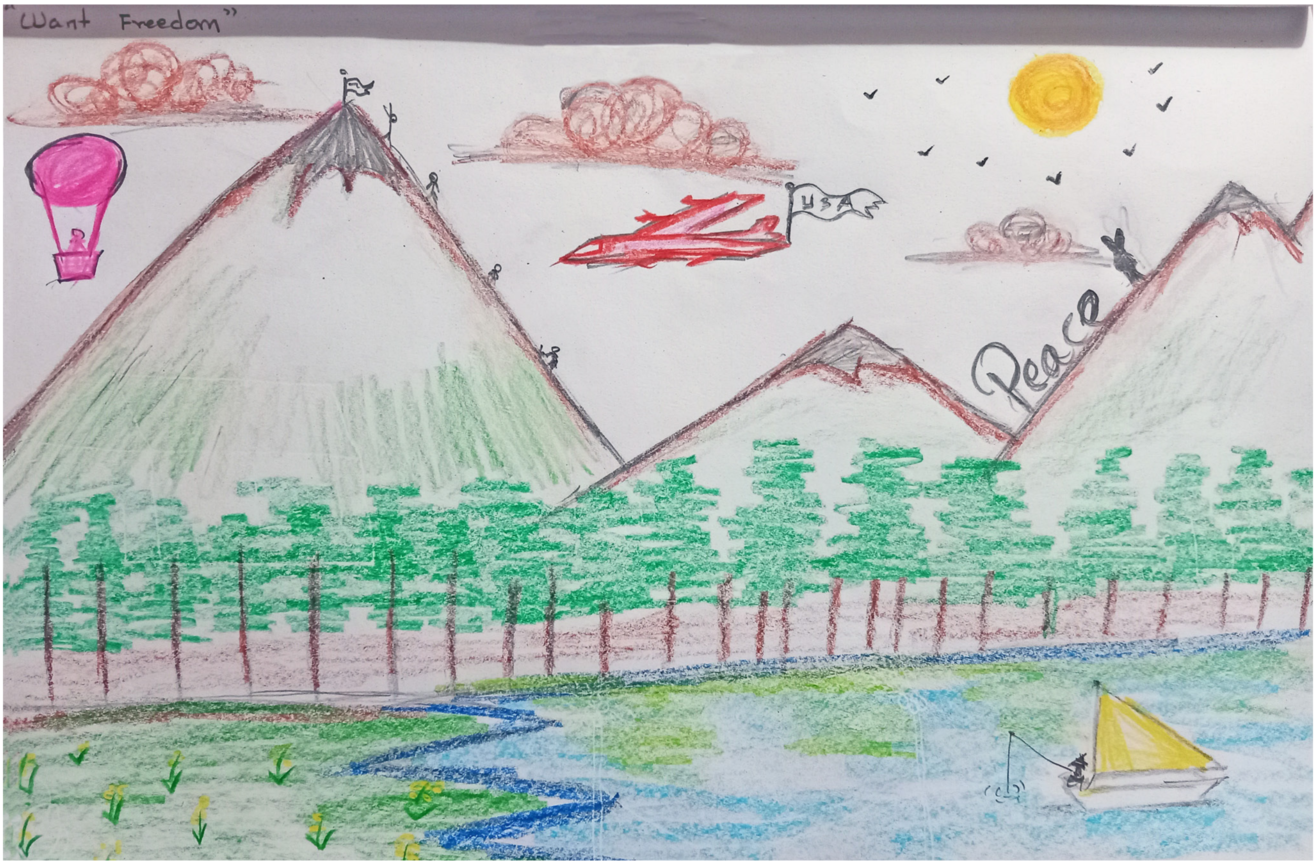
3.4 The natural world and a sense of wellbeing

For 20-year-old Kyai, in Mae La camp, it seems that living beyond survival entails pursuing activities and experiences that bring him joy, fulfilment and a connection with nature (Figure 5).

> The image depicts a mountain in a third country. This is a mountain in a third country that people climb; if I get there, I want to climb it once. And this is an American plane. It transports some passengers. The [foreground] depicts a stream and a person. I've always enjoyed fishing since I was a kid. Even now, I enjoy fishing, but there are no fish in the Belklo [Mae La] stream. I will always go fishing if I ever travel to a third country. Third countries are rich in natural resources. The situations are peaceful and incomparable to here. (Kyai, Mae La camp.)

The mention of an American plane suggests his desire for freedom and to escape to the US. Furthermore, fishing is vital to his life, bringing back childhood memories. But the absence of fish in the Belklo stream indicates the challenges he faces in his current environment and how the camp has changed over the years. Most significantly, the aspiration to go fishing in a third country highlights his belief that such countries offer abundant natural resources, peaceful situations and an incomparable quality of life compared with their present circumstances. As an active social media user, Kyai can transcend the camp boundaries and connect with those who have already been resettled. He can explore the world from within the camp and dream about his future.

Figure 5 'Want freedom' – a drawing by Kyai, Mae La camp



Examining the wellbeing of refugees in camps involves delving into how various aspects, from essential needs such as water and sanitation to connections with the natural environment, shape their overall sense of wellbeing and belonging. This connection between 'hard' humanitarian needs such as WASH and a broader understanding of wellbeing is particularly evident in the context of Mae La, where the availability of resources intersects with the camp residents' quality of life. Compared with Nu Po, Mae La benefits from better transportation, telecommunications infrastructure and electricity, offering specific advantages in terms of connectivity. However, Mae La camp faces a pressing water supply challenge, a fundamental need for both survival and wellbeing.

Previously nourished by a flowing river, the camp now grapples with a disappearing water source due to increased population and farming activities in the surrounding areas. This loss profoundly impacts the youths, exemplified by Kyai's longing to fish in the river as an avenue for joy and connection to the environment. The drying river mirrors the fading of opportunities, encapsulating the complex interplay between essential resources and broader human experiences. The Mae La camp committee has acknowledged this concern:

> The river is now disappearing due to the increasing number of people and farming in the surrounding areas. To contain the water in the camp, we try to preserve it by blocking some areas and digging wells. However, due to the increased population in the camp, getting water, especially during the dry season, is quite challenging.

By contrast, Nu Po camp appears to have a more reliable water supply, as families with small gardens can still access water from the river that runs through the camp. The continuous water flow in Nu Po is attributed to the absence of farming activities in the surrounding areas. According to the Nu Po camp committee, they prioritise preserving the natural environment:

> We do not cut down the trees in the surrounding areas. We also build small reservoirs in each section so that we can get enough water. There are specific areas where we do not allow camp residents to fish. But they can fish in certain areas.

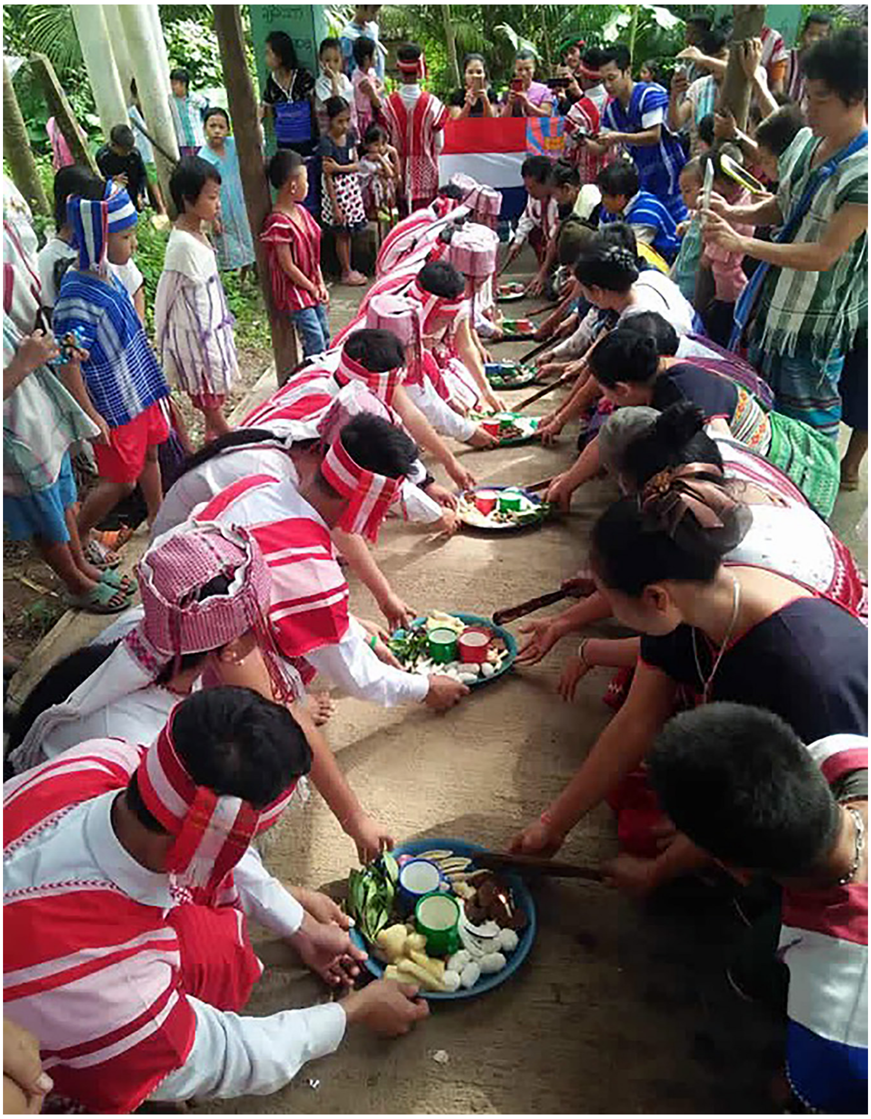
They further state: 'We work closely with camp residents and nearby Thai villagers to preserve water and the environment. We organise water cleaning every year and also fish banking'. The camp committee's efforts to maintain a reliable water supply demonstrate their dedication to maintaining a healthy and sustainable environment. By promoting environmental stewardship, they contribute to the residents' wellbeing.

This connection between wellbeing, access to resources and the environment mirrors Gagnon's (2019; 2020; 2021) exploration of refugee gardens and foraging, which she asserts is driven not only by practical necessity but also by a yearning for familiar tastes and emotional nourishment often scarce within humanitarian spaces. Just as Karen refugees cultivate gardens to connect with their home culture, the availability of water and a healthy environment contributes to the wellbeing of refugees in camps. The contrasting situations in Mae La and Nu Po further highlight how, even within a challenging camp context, opportunities for wellbeing can be nurtured through the conscious management of natural resources. The Nu Po camp committee exemplifies how wellbeing can be positively influenced by a holistic approach to camp life through efficient resource management, community engagement and a sensitivity to environmental preservation.

3.5 The role of religion: promoting resilience, community and peaceful coexistence

Religion plays a vital role in the daily lives of participants from Mae La and Nu Po. Individuals in both camps emphasise how religious activities have helped them cope with stress, sadness, exclusion and isolation. The people in these camps practise three main religions: Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Animism is still practised by a few and can be seen within traditional events such as the wrist-tying ceremony (Figure 6).

Figure 6 Wrist-tying event at a Buddhist temple, Mae La camp



Photograph: Saw E T'Mwee

Nu Po has nine churches, six Buddhist temples and two mosques, while Mae La boasts 43 churches, seven temples and four mosques. Religious institutions enhance spiritual wellbeing, promote social awareness and offer various forms of support. Some schools in the camps received support from religious institutions to bridge educational gaps and promote their beliefs.

Managing camps during a protracted crisis is challenging, as residents often resort to harmful coping mechanisms such as substance abuse, leading to domestic violence, gang activity and even suicide attempts (Bangkok Post, 2017; Naing, 2017). However, our interviews reveal that religious activities hold significant importance for many participants, providing happiness and connection. Say Ber Htoo from Nu Po stated, 'Participating in the church and community has helped me plan for the future'. Naw Htee and Naw Aye Aye from Nu Po and Mae La, respectively, stressed how attending church and listening to gospel songs alleviate loneliness and isolation. Buddhist participants found solace in listening to monks' chants and attending temple events.

Religious institutions also serve as centres for religious education and play a crucial role in camp management (Oh and van der Stouwe, 2008). They disseminate vital information such as camp rules, Covid-19 updates, repatriation or resettlement. They contribute to maintaining peace and order, especially among youth. A representative from Mae La's camp committee stated, 'We rely on religious leaders to spread information and promote peaceful coexistence among Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists, which has significantly reduced tensions in recent years'.

Our findings underscore religion's substantial role in participants' wellbeing, emphasising the importance of accommodating various faiths in the camp. Religious institutions not only support individuals' spiritual wellbeing but also foster social awareness. Additionally, they create environments that align with humanitarian objectives, encompassing psychosocial support, social cohesion, information dissemination and social safety nets.

Our study echoes Boateng's findings in a Ghanaian camp where the church served as a primary source of comfort and a crucial social group (Boateng, 2010: 395). It emphasises the role of religious institutions in providing solace and fostering community bonds, as discussed by many participants.

However, religious organisations are not part of the camp administration in Mae La and Nu Po. Most humanitarian organisations providing aid did not integrate a religious framework, presenting challenges in establishing a religious–secular dynamic.

We would argue that incorporating religiosity in the framework of humanitarian response is imperative for ensuring the camp's inclusivity and sustainable living conditions (Mim, 2020). Despite this empirical insight, it remains unclear whether aid organisations in Mae La and Nu Po camps encompass a religious dimension within their framework, even though youth from both camps emphasise the pivotal role of religious institutions in their wellbeing.

4 Relational wellbeing and survival strategies

Whether in public spaces or the family home, relational wellbeing in the form of social capital (relationships and networks) was significant to most individuals we interviewed. Relational wellbeing, according to van der Mark et al., 'is commonly theorised as an element of human wellbeing based on human beings' need for connections [and] constitutes the quantity and quality of an individual's social relations' (van der Mark et al., 2023: 97).

Within the extraordinary settings of Mae La and Nu Po, seemingly 'normal' interactions and activities are shaped by resource scarcity, where even basic necessities such as food are in short supply, leading inhabitants to rely on survival strategies. This chapter explores relational wellbeing through the lens of the evolving dynamics of food distribution in the camps, and the impact of reduced funding on the community's ability to sustain itself. Furthermore, we highlight the disconnect between residents' experiences of hunger and humanitarian organisations' assessments regarding individual needs, questioning the camps' evaluation and reporting mechanisms.

4.1 Community networks for survival

What resources and actors outside the formal humanitarian sector do people draw on in pursuit of wellbeing, and what role do they play in this process? We found that the community relies heavily on their networks inside and outside the camps for material and mental support. Social media such as Facebook also became a lifeline for many to keep in touch with political and family news. Naw Htee, for example, spoke about her many friends in Nu Po. She likes to hang out and discuss 'normal things'.

We argue that 'normal things' are always relative to the cultural context and politics of everyday life. In Naw Htee's case, she said they mostly talk about the current situation in the camp and their aspirations for the future. She is also an active social media user. Like most participants, Naw Htee uses social media to watch movies, listen to music, keep up-to-date with news, and connect to those inside and outside the camp.

Having a close network of friends in the camp also served as a strategy for some to survive when resources, such as charcoal or food, became scarce. All participants said they lacked enough food or building materials to fix their homes. Naw Gay Gay from Nu Po, for example, stated that without her social network, it would be hard to survive, 'when food is not enough, and we need help, I can borrow from my friends'. We would argue that social media was a resource outside the formal humanitarian sector that individuals prioritise in pursuing wellbeing and living beyond survival as it is an easy way to connect to others who may help them.

Capitalising on his in-camp networks and relationships, Saw Hoo Moo, also from Nu Po, said he does have enough food and later explained his strategy for keeping well-fed: 'I visit people and share their food, and my stomach gets full'. He said that he had seen a significant change in how items are distributed, which meant more pressure was put on the individual to build and maintain networks outside the humanitarian sector: 'In the past, I think it was more than enough. When they distributed food, we had a lot. Later, the distribution pattern changed'.

4.2 Changing food ration support

Most participants highlighted that the food rations were insufficient and had decreased over the years. Since the funding reduction on food support in 2015, there has been a realignment of the food ration support based on a family's needs. In 2023, TBC identified families within four categories: Self-Reliance, Standard, Vulnerable and Most Vulnerable. Families categorised under Self-Reliance do not receive support. In discussion with TBC, it argued that it had a stringent identification process and that each family is carefully considered.

We observed that before 2015, food 'seemed to be' abundant, meaning that the encamped community did not need to borrow or share meals with others. In fact, many said they could even save some food for the following month. However, after 2015, due to a decrease in funding from donors who left the camp to focus internally on Burma/Myanmar, rations were adjusted to meet refugees with needs deemed the most pressing. This shortage led to them sharing within or borrowing from their networks.

It was pointed out that some individuals depended on remittance from friends and family who have resettled to a third country. Addressing the question of which additional resources, beyond the formal humanitarian sector, people rely on to enhance their wellbeing, we found that many consider life to be unbearable without remittances from relatives. Participants claimed they would contact their networks through social media, such as Facebook Messenger. Without access to the internet, it would be very challenging for participants to improve their everyday lives. One humanitarian actor realistically highlighted: 'Due to the system's constraints and lack of funding, we can only provide basic support and maintain the current system'. Yet not all our participants had a social network inside the camp who could share their rations or outside the camp that could send back remittances. This meant our participants relied on leaving the camp illegally as a necessity for work – an area Chapter 6 will discuss further.

4.3 Evaluation and reporting mechanisms: challenges in assessing hunger and aid

In Mae La and Nu Po camps, feedback boxes are set up to allow camp residents to report their dissatisfaction to the camp's KRC. The camp committee reviews the complaints and subsequently reports them to the relevant organisations for further investigation and resolution of the concerns raised by the residents. However, none of our participants were aware of this resource. Furthermore, there seems to be a disconnect between organisations and how hunger is evaluated. A humanitarian actor from one of the women's groups stated that from their survey, residents articulated that they were hungry, and that food support was insufficient. However, a humanitarian actor at TBC argued that they carried out in-depth research across the camp, and that TBC's results showed that residents were receiving enough.

We observed two concerns; the first is a disconnect between the organisations and how they review, evaluate and report camp issues such as hunger. The second concern lies with the problem of how survival is characterised. On the one hand, the biological approach, as seen in Agamben's (1998) theory of the state of exception and 'bare life', refers to basic, biological existence devoid of social, political or meaningful dimensions, often linked to vulnerability and exclusion. The focus here is the biopolitics of life and how the body is understood as an object that must be managed and monitored, watered, fed and nothing else (Hill, 2022).

While Agamben's concept of the exception and 'bare life' has dominated refugee studies and humanitarian discourse, we invite a more nuanced understanding of survival. Thus, we align with Fassin's perspective that 'survival is to be fully alive […] It is the "unconditional affirmation" of life and the pleasure of living' (Fassin, 2010: 83), which is important and often overlooked.

In conclusion, this chapter illustrates the crucial role of relationships and participant strategies for survival. The significance of these relationships cannot be overstated, as they serve as both a source of support and survival in the face of resource scarcity. Furthermore, we highlight the shifting dynamics of food distribution and the impact of reduced funding on the refugee community's ability to sustain themselves. The categorisation of families by TBC based on their needs underlines the broader changing landscapes of aid provision. Additionally, the disconnect between the residents' experience of hunger and the assessments of humanitarian organisations raises questions about the evaluation and reporting mechanisms within the camps.

Finally, we challenge the prevailing notion of survival as a mere biological existence and instead invite a more nuanced understanding that encompasses the affirmation of life and the pursuit of joy even within the confines of a refugee camp. This perspective aligns with Fassin's idea that survival is about not just staying alive but also embracing the pleasure of living, emphasising the resilience and humanity of these young refugees despite their challenging circumstances.

5 Education as a cornerstone for wellbeing

Education and the right to work are paramount in our participants' lives. This chapter investigates the pivotal role of accredited education as a cornerstone of normality, skill acquisition, enhanced employability, and the foundation for self-reliance and integration. Against the backdrop of historical factors, including the Karen people's displacement, statelessness and commitment to preserving their cultural identity, this chapter explores the challenges young, encamped individuals face in the absence of accredited education.

Additionally, we examine vocational training programmes, locally administered by the Karen themselves, as a promising avenue towards self-sufficiency for camp youths. We delve into the advantages and challenges associated with these programmes, including beneficiary selection dynamics and communication issues with aid agencies.

5.1 Historical context of education

Education in the refugee camps along the Thai border, particularly Mae La refugee camp, holds profound significance (Yeo et al., 2020). To comprehend the vital role of education within this context, it helps to consider the historical factors that have led to displacement and the preservation of Karen identity. As the Karen fled across the border due to the ongoing civil war, they brought with them their education system. This education is not merely a means of emergency response but represents a point of pride and cultural survival for the Karen people in exile (ibid.).

Although our participants in Mae La and Nu Po emphasised the significance of education, they highlighted that without an accredited education, they would be unable to fulfil their aspirations of leaving the camps to 'get good jobs'. Accredited education is often an overlooked aspect of everyday life due to the expectations of accessibility. In many so-called 'developed' countries, accredited education is often taken for granted, as it is readily accessible to most citizens. This leads to an assumption that education is similarly accessible worldwide. Furthermore, in crisis situations such as along the Thailand–Burma/Myanmar border, aid organisations' immediate focus is on providing food, shelter and medical care, as these are perceived as more urgent needs. As we have observed in previous chapters, humanitarian organisations often operate with limited resources and thus prioritise areas where they believe they can have a more immediate and visible impact. In the context of Mae La and Nu Po, education – especially at higher levels and with accreditation – is considered a secondary priority.

Catharine Brun states: 'When people feel trapped in a 'never-ending present […] it may seem meaningless to work to achieve future goals because that future lies too far ahead' (Brun, 2015: 24). However, she observes that even under such extreme conditions and uncertainty 'and not being able to control the future, people do anticipate the possibility of alternative futures' (ibid.). Our study illuminates how accredited education is crucial for encamped refugees such as James from Mae La, who expressed that the camp's lack of job and education opportunities affects his wellbeing and future ambitions. However, in James's case, he stated that there are 'no special' opportunities, so there is no motivation, 'even if you finish school, you can be a teacher and get paid 1500 THB [Thai bhat, equivalent to £33] a month, or you can be a security guard and get paid the same'. Although he would like to continue with higher education, he acknowledged that the colleges in the camp are not accredited, and only a few well-connected individuals will get the opportunities to go further. A report written in 2015 by Burma Link supports James's concerns. In relation to higher education, they state that:

> As these opportunities are only available to a few students each year, thousands of capable young adults are left with no means to pursue their dream of higher education. Many young people are determined to help their people and their country, but with no place to go to study, they often end up opening a shop or becoming a nurse or a teacher in the camp (Burma Link, 2015).

However, not all participants felt the same hopelessness expressed by James. As mentioned in a Section 4.1, Naw Htee stated that when she is with her friends, they talk about 'normal things' such as future aspirations and education. She told us that since she dropped out of school, she wanted to encourage other youths in Nu Po not to follow in her footsteps. She asserted that she viewed (the lack of) education as a critical factor impacting her wellbeing. She recognised education's benefits in shaping a better future for herself and the community.

Supporting Naw Htee's position, scholars of higher education in protracted refugee contexts have argued that higher education for refugees can significantly contribute to both the host country and/or the country where they will be resettled (Wright and Plasterer, 2010; Yeo et al., 2020). Research in other refugee camp settings similarly underlines the crucial protective role higher education can play in helping individuals and communities cope with their daily lives during indefinite waiting periods (Crea and McFarland, 2015). Despite this, it is rarely a priority for donors. As Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, there are limited policy frameworks for enhancing refugee rights and opportunities within and outside the camps – this includes the right to pursue higher education outside the camp. As Zeus contends, there has been little improvement in education for youth in Thai refugee camps under the 'Basic Education program'. The neglect of the higher educational needs of refugee youths represents a significant hindrance to their effective opportunities and freedoms to develop to their fullest potential, thus illuminating a substantial gap in the field of education in emergencies and protracted crisis situations (Zeus, 2011: 269).

In one of our focus groups in Nu Po, the topic of conversation centred around education and resettling to a third country. Naw Wah points out that there are no options for the young to continue their education post-grade 10. Three schools have closed in Nu Po due to a lack of funding support, or they were relocated to Burma/Myanmar after the 2015 pro-democracy government won the election. Expensive school fees, a lack of donor support and the restrictions on the freedom to send their children to schools outside the camp were participants' main points of concern and played heavily on this group's wellbeing.

5.2 Advantages and challenges of vocational training

Aside from formal education, vocational training stands out as a significant avenue for youths seeking self-sufficiency. Typically facilitated by Karen camp-based staff, this approach has advantages, such as leveraging local knowledge. Participants acknowledged that through vocational training programmes they were able to acquire new practical skills that helped with boredom. The programmes also act as an opportunity to build a sense of belonging and social cohesion. Engaging in productive activities with others further had a positive impact on some of our participants' mental health and wellbeing as they could envision and plan for a future outside the camps.

However, vocational training also brings challenges tied to social networks that can lead to biased selection as to who receives an opportunity. These difficulties are compounded by ineffective communication from aid agencies, exacerbated by an excessive reliance on digital channels.

Within the formal Karen educational system, vocational training programmes, often funded by international organisations, are locally managed by the Karen. Our study's humanitarian actors, all long-standing figures within the humanitarian sector, possessed deep insights into the camps and the political landscape. Surprisingly, many youths were unaware of available programmes, voicing a need for improved communication from aid providers. This resonates with Agier's (2011) notion of pervasive inequalities within refugee camps, where disparities in access to information and resources are driven by complex power dynamics and camp social structures. Humanitarian actors expressed concern about selection procedures, suggesting that camp-based staff might predominantly involve friends and family, hindering diversity. Although social media is employed for outreach, it was acknowledged to be insufficient. This sentiment was corroborated by camp-based staff, who have observed the recurring participation of the same individuals and the challenge of engaging newcomers. While specific individuals such as Saw Yo Tha in Mae La expressed enthusiasm for training opportunities, there is an overall trend of inadequate dissemination of programme information, leading to a lack of awareness among youths.

Additionally, participant selection raised questions about fairness, as affiliation with the organisation or existing staff members often seemed to be a factor. We would argue that this unequal distribution of power and resources leads to social stratification and marginalisation of certain individuals or groups within the camp, exacerbating existing inequalities and further compromising the wellbeing and dignity of the youths.

6 Right to livelihood opportunities and work

This chapter addresses the harsh reality that compels many camp residents to seek illegal employment outside the camps despite the inherent risks and uncertainties associated with their stateless status.

6.1 Desire for freedom of movement

Our research found that aid providers were aware of the issues discussed by youth and reported in the previous chapters, many of which are closely linked to freedom of movement. Several humanitarian actors from international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the KRC told us that part of the advocacy message being disseminated to the Thai government was situated around the youths' need for further studies, livelihood opportunities to work outside the camp and local integration, including the right to reside and access to legal documents. However, due to the complex nature of the existing refugee policies, the challenge remains in terms of implementation under the current government. Refugees residing in the camps along the border are prohibited from working outside the camps; while some do so, it is illegal. The situation worsened during the Covid-19 pandemic due to rising living costs, leading to protests, depression and self-harm (UNHCR, 2021).

A 2012 Human Rights Watch report found that due to the precarious Thai laws surrounding refugee status, Thailand presented 'Burmese refugees with the unfair choice of stagnating for years in remote refugee camps or living and working outside the camps without protection from arrest and deportation' (Frelick, 2012). Our research suggests that not much has changed in 2023, but this may shift with the newly elected Thai government. All our participants articulated a desire to be self-reliant, yet the situation in the camps and lack of opportunities did not allow them to fulfil this need. Thus, many had no choice but to leave the camp and work illegally to supplement their rations. It should be noted that in the Tak province, leaving the camp is possible with permission gained from the authorities; however, most individuals do not have the finances to pay 200 THB for a three-day camp pass. This meant they often found alternative ways to exit the camps.

Saw Yo Tha from Mae La, for example, described the tensions between the ordinariness of meeting up with friends and discussing present and future ambitions juxtaposed against the career and financial challenges of living in the camp:

> When we meet, we usually talk about our daily activities, such as how is school going. Sometimes, we talk about life careers. We say there are no good salaries in the camp even if we work in the hospital or school. So, we cannot support our life and our family much. We use our time to express our feelings to each other and suggest ways to improve our life.

K. King from Mae La equates wellbeing with the right to opportunities and to work. He articulates frustration about the amount of spare time he has: ‘What can we do?’ he asked us, ‘there are no jobs available in the camp. When the day starts, we go around, spend our time, and the day ends’. Like many other participants, he further articulated that he received nothing from the aid providers. Dunn observed how refugees often focused on ‘nothingness’ or ‘having nothing’. She states that: ‘Nothingness is not only material but also temporal. It is a void of unfilled time, long stretches with nothing to do but wait’ (Dunn, 2014: 294). Despite the everyday routines we observed in the camps, the prolonged displacement spanning almost four decades has left many participants waiting and ‘stuck’.

Providing an example of what strategies, networks, resources, or other means people use to pursue their wellbeing and transcend, to some extent, their ‘stuckness’, K. King relied on his network within the camp to provide ‘odd jobs when needed’ or he ‘sneaks out illegally’ and works ‘in secret’. The lack of job opportunities in the camp and the pressure of leaving illegally affects K. King’s wellbeing on multiple levels. He said when he goes, ‘it is with a heavy heart. I don’t want to leave my family. With all these difficulties, I must go and work outside. If I don’t leave them, we don’t have food. We don’t have money to spend’.

6.2 Creative endeavours and economic independence

Against the challenges, numerous cottage industries thrive within a city camp such as Mae La, encompassing a vast indoor market, an outdoor wet market, restaurants, a bakery, hair salons, motorbike taxi services and stores specialising in household item repairs. Furthermore, Hill (2021) found that some creative youths engaged in music production within one of the three recording studios and subsequently received payment through social media platforms such as YouTube. Hill asserts that YouTube provided the youths with a means of earning money and opened a space where Karen youths can be seen and self-represent (Hill, 2021: 6).

For many young women in Nu Po, weaving was not only a pastime that brought women together (as described in Chapter 3), but to some extent it is also a source of economic independence. Naw Toh Poe stated that importance lies in the convenience of being able to do it at home and a way to be self-sufficient: ‘If you need something, you can make it yourself’, which she expressed helped her family. This sentiment was shared by many young women in Nu Po who used their skills to supplement their rations. Say Ber Htoo claimed she sold her weavings locally and internationally: ‘I weave traditional Karen clothes. Sometimes, people order my clothes from a third country, and sometimes they come in person’. What she sells helps boost her low teacher’s salary. However, not all women claiming to weave could make enough to survive. Naw Gay Gay contended that she would like to weave professionally, but what she makes is ‘not enough to eat’. She says that if she could get help and support with setting up her business, it would significantly improve her life.

As mentioned in Chapter 5, many vocational training programmes are provided in Mae La and Nu Po. Training includes sewing, baking, mechanics and hairdressing. Although weaving is not part of the vocational training offering, it is run by the women's group. According to the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO):

> We previously provided camp women with training, but funding has ceased. Now, the central office supplies threads and pays for handmade weaving, then seeks markets for their products.

We contend that KWO's priorities align with the needs of young women in Nu Po. However, the organisation cannot fully implement these priorities to adequately support the women due to financial constraints. As an alternative, it has devised strategies such as supplying threads and identifying markets for the women, allowing them to retain some financial autonomy. While this approach is strategically sound, it still falls short of fully meeting the women's needs.

Some participants unable to start businesses work for NGOs within the camps. For instance, Kho Gyi Paw finds fulfilment despite daily struggles with rations and resources, stating she contributes to her community. By contrast, Saw Yaw, also from Nu Po, initially joined an NGO through a drug rehab programme, which greatly aided his recovery but left him uncertain about its long-term benefits. He notes that people working outside the camp enjoy more opportunities and a better quality of life.

6.3 From training to livelihoods

Naw Tha Dun Mu, from Nu Po, expressed a desire to work for herself. She wants to use her skills as a seamstress and her passion for sewing flowers onto Karen shirts to start her own business. When asked whether she has had any help with achieving her goals, she confirmed that she attended training on how to sew, which was helpful in the past. However, she noted the decline in training assistance. She observed that programmes focusing on sewing or cooking skills are no longer available, or at least they are not communicated to her. She also highlighted a disconnect between the training and implementation:

> I think the trainings were very useful. We can use them in the future to sustain a livelihood. It can also become a proper way to earn for our family; however, I do not have a sewing machine.

This disconnect was also expressed by other participants who had attended training programmes but did not have the means to implement what they had learned to earn money. This raises questions about whether providing supply-side livelihood support (in terms of vocational training) could be better accompanied by looking at demand-side support in terms of linking trainees up to markets, jobs, or broader efforts to support local markets, such as how KWO is approaching the situation.

Several humanitarian actors had articulated that within their training programmes, they had set up a scheme where individuals could take out a loan to achieve implementation and start a business. The repayments, they stated, were arranged on a case-by-case basis, and over the Covid-19 pandemic, the repayments were frozen. Naw Tha Dun Mu's situation highlights, on the one hand, how vital livelihood training is to an individual's wellbeing. Yet, on the other hand, it emphasises the challenges an individual faces after the programmes have finished and they have no way to start making money. It further illuminates a lack of information and communication between the participants who attend the training programmes and aid providers on how to access further resources to start businesses for self-sufficiency.

6.4 Hope for change

Concerning the individuals' future aspirations of leaving the camps and working in Thailand, one humanitarian actor stated that their organisation was working towards a solution. Yet residents in the camp were not privy to this work. The humanitarian actor said that although it was difficult to know what would happen in the future: 'There are different activities ongoing in terms of opportunities such as resettlement. Registration status such as unregistered/unverified continues to be a challenge'. They continued:

> In terms of education, Thailand has strongly committed to recognising refugees through the Global Refugee Forum in 2019 and Global Refugee Compact. However, with the coup and Covid pandemic happening in between, no implementation has happened.

They further stressed that 'for education and work opportunities, we try to advocate for youths to get legal documents [Thai ID], but we face challenges'.

On 2 June 2023, a statement was released by the National News Bureau of Thailand (NNT) claiming that: 'The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the Thai government have joined forces to strengthen their efforts to end childhood statelessness in Thailand'. Providing some semblance of hope, the press release further stated that:

> The Thai government has endorsed UNHCR's #IBelong campaign to end statelessness by 2024 and has vowed to provide a path to attaining legal status or nationality for stateless people, including children, as well as to improve their access to protection, education, and social services. The law also states that any child born in Thailand has the right to register at birth, obtain a birth certificate, attend school, and receive health care even if they do not have legal status or any paperwork (NNT, 2023).

The situation for young, encamped people in Nu Po and Mae La remains challenging despite the efforts of the aid providers. The Thai laws surrounding refugee status create a difficult choice for the youths between stagnating and waiting in the camps or risking arrest and deportation by leaving and working outside the camps. The lack of opportunities and resources within the camps leads many residents to seek alternative means to support themselves, often resorting to working illegally and exposing themselves to labour exploitation. The desire for self-reliance and living beyond survival is evident among the participants, but they face numerous barriers and uncertainties. Although some initiatives exist within the camps, effective communication, resource and implementation gaps remain. Chapter 7 expands the conversation and focuses on the 2021 military coup d'état in Burma/Myanmar and the youths' hopes and aspirations for the future.

7 No future for return: 'stuckness' and a desire for escape

In this chapter, we explore the youths' profound desire for a future beyond the confines of their protracted refugee existence. Through a lens focused on the future, we explore being 'stuck' and how the participants describe themselves as birds locked in a cage. We discuss the multifaceted challenges the young face and how they find themselves in a liminal space with limited opportunities for local integration and a seemingly elusive path to return to Burma/Myanmar. Our participants' narratives grapple with the tension between dreaming of a better life 'in the world' and the harsh realities of their protracted displacement.

7.1 Past and present: generational trauma and new uncertainties

Despite being born in the refugee camps or being too young to remember life in Burma/Myanmar, many Mae La and Nu Po participants maintained a strong emotional connection to the villages or areas they consider home. Even though many have never experienced life in the Karen State firsthand, narratives of fighting and fear of Myanmar's army have been deeply ingrained in their lives through stories passed down through generations. These stories have become integral to their identity and have fuelled a sense of collective trauma (Hill, 2022).

Similar to Malkki's (1995) research on Burundian refugees in Tanzania, the weight of this generational trauma is evident in our participants' narratives, impacting their overall wellbeing and influencing their aspirations for the future, particularly their hopes of leaving the camp and resettling in Burma/Myanmar. The complex interplay between their displaced status, their inherited stories of conflict and their desire to live beyond survival reflects the profound psychological and emotional impact of their experiences as refugees on their wellbeing and how they live beyond the concept of mere survival.

In this light, it is perhaps surprising that most of our participants first claimed the coup d'état had 'no effect on the camps'. However, the conversations quickly turned to how the increased conflict in the Karen State affected their emotional state. Saw Yaw from Nu Po said:

> I think the coup d'état mostly impacts my mind. I don't like it. I am so afraid. I have a lot of fear of going back. Some people have suffered a lot. I really feel sorry for them. My mind is full of these thoughts.

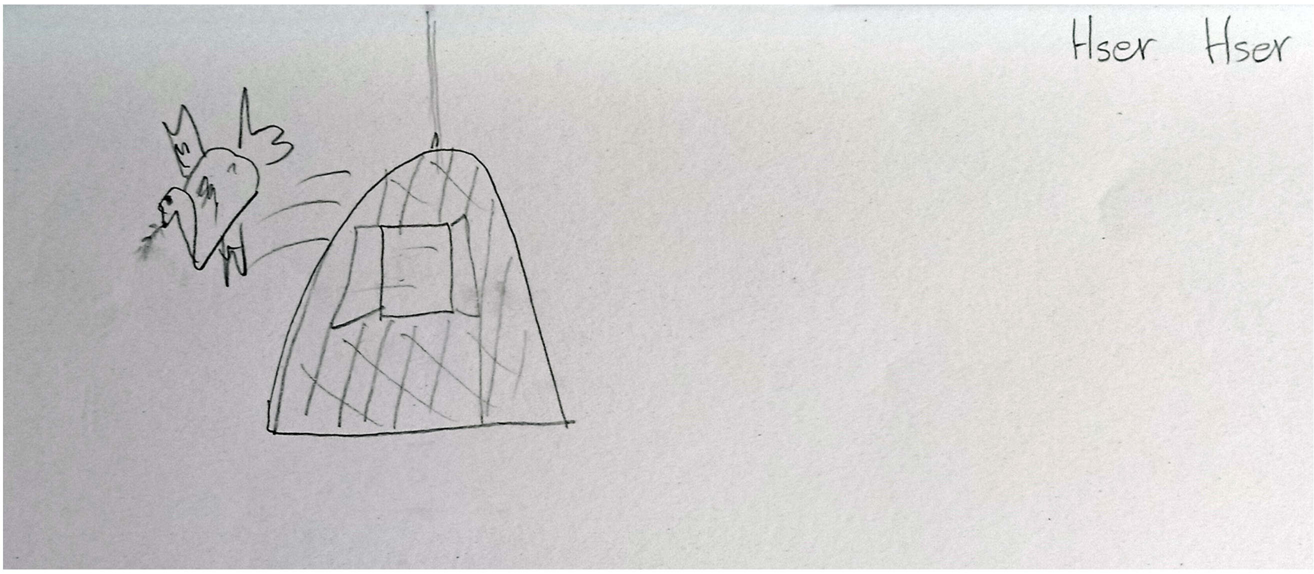
While encamped residents are not officially permitted to leave the camp to cross the border, many still risk it to visit their families. The increased conflict has significantly widened the distance between loved ones, making reuniting and maintaining connections even more challenging.

In Chapter 4, we discussed how young people in Mae La and Nu Po used digital networks to stay updated about Burma/Myanmar. While digital media offered a sense of connection, it also harmed their emotional wellbeing. For instance, seeing villages burning on Facebook caused panic for Naw Orchid, who feared an attack on Mae La. This constant exposure to distressing events on social media led to anxiety. Naw Tha Dun Mu expressed feeling trapped in the camp, emphasising how the ongoing conflict prevents them from returning home and rebuilding their lives.

7.2 Birds in a cage

Reflecting on her 24 years of living in the camp, Hser Hser explained: 'Regardless of whether I live here or any other refugee camp, there are aspects that will bring me both joy and sorrow'. She claimed that living in the camp signifies freedom from fear (from being attacked by Myanmar's army) while acknowledging that this comes at a cost to her freedom of movement to leave the camp. This complex mix of emotions between security and mobility was evident in all of our interviews in both camps. Hser Hser highlights these complexities in her illustration (Figure 7). She stated that she uses the bird and a cage as a metaphor for being trapped and dependent:

Figure 7 Drawing by Hser Hser, Mae La camp

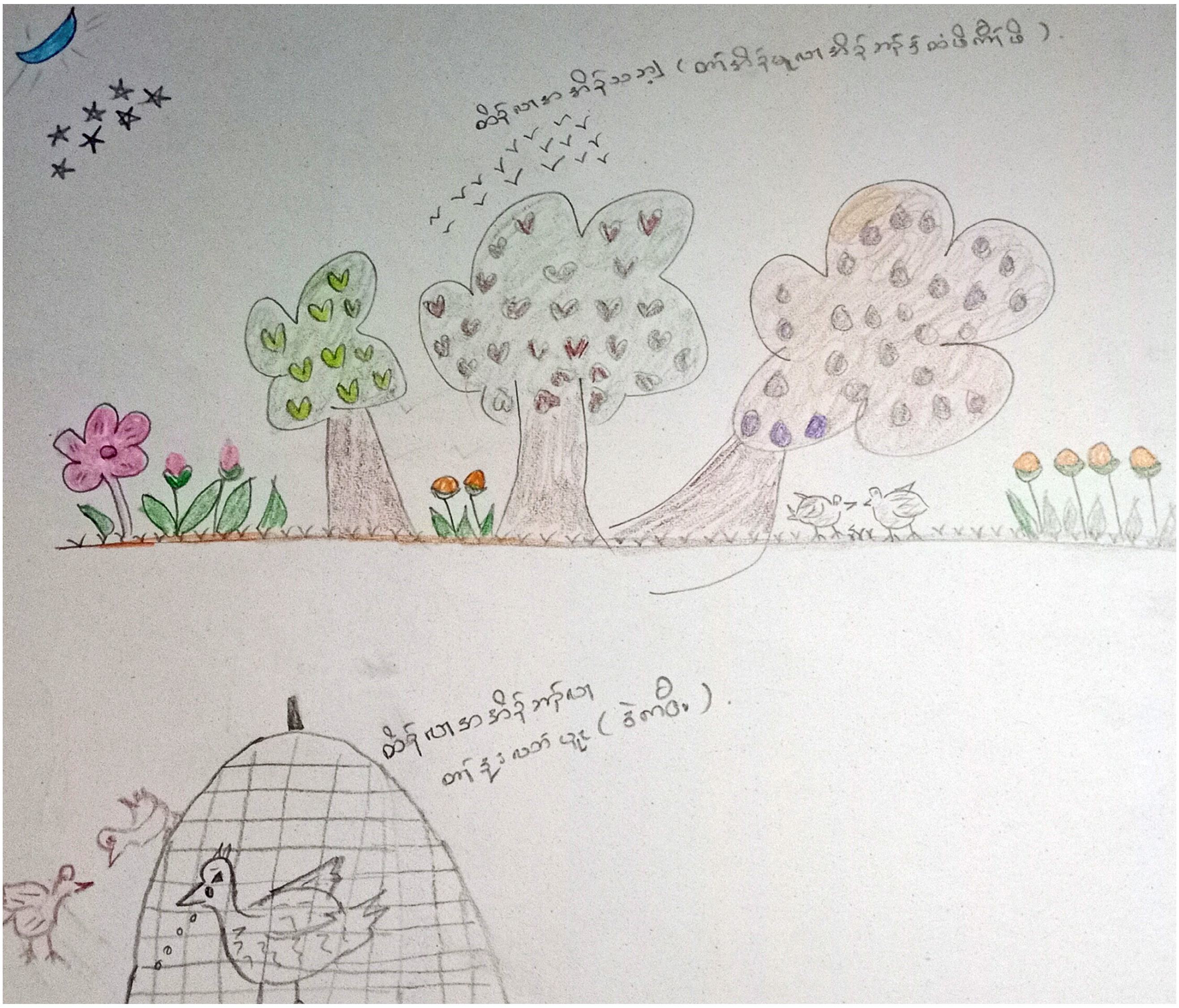


> This is a bird that is kept in the cage. This bird is not happy living in the cage. It is both tied to and kept in the cage. It cannot find food and nobody will release it. Someone always has to provide food for it and it's not enough. It has to stay in the cage, whether it is provided with enough or not. It would like to find food for itself. It is not happy to live here anymore, but only when someone releases it, the bird will be free. I would like to give this example; we are living here, we don't have the right to go out, we want to be released.

Hser Hser's example of the bird confined to a cage illustrates a critical insight into the youth's perception of wellbeing and living beyond survival. It emphasises the juxtaposition of an inherent desire for autonomy and freedom with that of 'stuckness' and dependency. Like the bird's dream to be released from the cage, youths such as Hser Hser long for the opportunity to break free and live a life of their choosing. The bird's dissatisfaction with being dependent on others resonates with Hser Hser's desire for self-sufficiency and the ability to provide for herself. Importantly, it speaks of the youths' desire for empowerment, agency and the pursuit of rights, highlighting that wellbeing and living beyond mere survival necessitate the opportunity for self-determination and freedom. Naw Toh Poe, from Nu Po drew a similar scene (Figure 8). Describing her drawing, she said:

> This is a small bird in a cage. This represents my life in the refugee camp. There's no door. I cannot go out if I'm not let out. I cannot eat if I'm not fed. If it is not fed, it'll just die. These two birds saw the bird in the cage. They want the bird in the cage to be free like them. But the bird in the cage cannot go because of the cage. So, the little bird in the cage cries. That's my life in this refugee camp.

Figure 8 Drawing by Naw Toh Poe, Nu Po camp



The drawing and the accompanying description offer valuable insights into the themes Naw Toh Poe prioritises in relation to her wellbeing. The absence of a door symbolises the lack of freedom of movement, highlighting the restricted mobility experienced by all of our participants. The dependence on others for basic needs, portrayed by the inability to eat without being fed, stresses the challenges of survival and the reliance on external support and rations. Finally, Naw Toh Poe's focus on the little bird crying reflects the emotional toll and distress associated with her protracted displacement, confinement and reliance on others.

The metaphor of a bird in a cage is not new to how encamped Karen describe themselves. In 2010, Al Fuertes explored the impact of the ongoing war and displacement on encamped identities. Many of his participants described themselves as birds in a cage. He observed that:

> the way the metaphor constructs and articulates meaning – it is a living metaphor. This happens within a specific context with its own time and space. It expresses needs, feelings, aspirations, and viewpoints (Fuertes, 2010: 20).

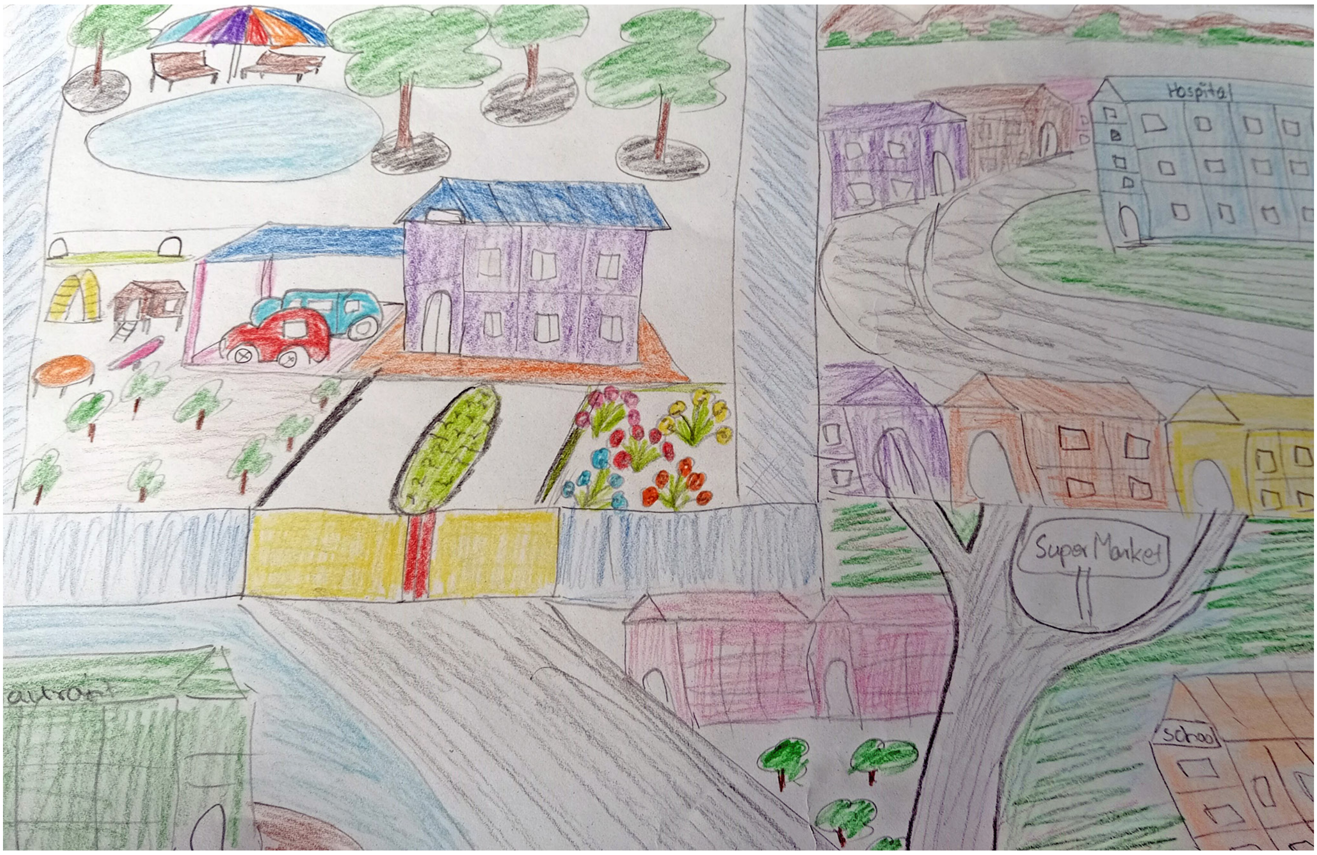
The metaphor of a bird in a cage speaks directly to the encamped youths' experience and how they perceive themselves. Fuertes concludes that metaphors are key in defining and organising people's experiences and understanding political reality: 'Through the birds inside a cage metaphor, political concepts such as state, displacement and refugee, acquire a tangible reality' (Fuertes, 2010: 23).

7.3 A narrow path out: futures beyond the camps

The aspirations and priorities of the Mae La and Nu Po youths reflected a strong desire to envision a future beyond the confines of the camp, with a desire for modernity especially evident in many of the youths' drawings. Naw Aye Aye, for example, describes her future imaginings (Figure 9):

> I want to live in a house with a yard. Everyone wants to live in a good house. I also want a car for transportation because it is a modern way to travel nowadays. There will be a small garden. There will be a playground for my children. There will also be a pool in my yard. Also, I will put a small farm behind my house. I also want to feed some animals like chickens and pigs. I want to live in a house with a big yard. My house must be near the hospital. Also, the market must be near to my house.

Figure 9 Drawing by Naw Aye Aye, Mae La camp



For Naw Aye Aye, the desire to live in a good house with a yard reflects the importance of having a comfortable, stable and safe living environment. Wanting a car illuminates the need for mobility and freedom, and living near a hospital and market indicates the importance she places on accessibility to essential services and amenities.

However, humanitarian assistance – due to the political parameters the aid organisations in Thailand find themselves working within – provides little to the realisation of these imagined futures. Reflecting on aid in protracted crises, Dunn states that: ‘Despite its best intentions, humanitarian aid routinely creates this kind of void, pinning people down not only in space but in time and holding them in an extended state of torpor and stasis’ (Dunn, 2014: 294). Although humanitarian aid in Mae La and Nu Po has played a pivotal role in providing life-saving assistance, including food, shelter, healthcare and vocational training, it does not appear to be contributing to our participants’ self-sufficiency and self-reliance, despite our participants’ motivations for self-determination. As participants describe, activities aimed at keeping young peoples’ futures open, such as education or livelihoods support, are – even for those who are able to access them – all too often experienced as dead ends offering no meaningful way forwards. As currently experienced, these can end up emphasising rather than mitigating the sense of ‘stuckness’ and futility that characterises many young people’s experiences of everyday life in the camp. Only until the political landscape changes and Thailand adopts a new stance on refugee status will aid organisations be able to fulfil their objectives.

During the interviews, it became evident that the youths' main focus for the future was on the prospect of relocating to a third country such as the US or Australia. These aspirations seemed to occupy their thoughts as they dreamed of a better life beyond the confines of the camp gates and being released from their cage – although at the time of the interviews, even this option is unavailable, with UNHCR's mass resettlement programme to the US and other countries having wrapped up in 2014. Perhaps reflecting this desire to relocate, when asked which aid organisations they knew helped in the camps, most participants attributed the primary provider of assistance to UNHCR, despite the fact that actors such as TBC and KRC provide the bulk of assistance.

7.4 Having a say: agency and the future

In the narratives we gathered, it became evident that many youths felt a pressing need for someone to be held accountable for the outcomes and the manner in which decisions were made regarding their future.

On one level, this reflects the ongoing and pervasive lack of critical information discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 about who is doing what to support them, and what opportunities are available. This is also linked to a clear gap in the streamlining and coordination of assistance: while KRC as the representative body for Karen refugees is in charge of facilitating coordination with humanitarian agencies to address the community's needs, there seems to be a disconnect between them, the camp committees and the other agencies. We were told humanitarian organisations often conducted new activities and initiatives without the camp committees' knowledge. The resulting opacity and apparent randomness of livelihoods interventions or targeting of assistance limits youths' ability to plan for the future and may ultimately contribute to the wider sense that they are not in charge of their own destinies. This reflects Dunn's assertion that the chaotic 'adhocracy' that characterises humanitarian service delivery, even in protracted settings, can undermine people's wellbeing by perpetuating a state of prolonged unpredictability in which the future never becomes clear (Dunn, 2012).

On another level though, it speaks to the limited options for youth in the camp to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Younger people have historically been excluded from leadership roles in Karen society, and previous research has documented a frustration among younger refugees about not being listened to by older generations (e.g. Hill, 2021). Positively, participants reported that in recent years, this dynamic has started to shift: The KYO has become an important platform for young people to raise their voices on issues that matter to them, and youth are now represented in camp leadership meetings and discussions with outside actors. However, participants reflected that increased presence is yet to translate into actual decision-making power. Where discussions expose fault lines in interests and norms across generations – difficult conversations around sexual and reproductive health, for example – youth representatives still feel shut down and marginalised. Beyond the seeming randomness of aid interventions, the sense of being denied a say in their future is also likely undermining youths' wellbeing by contributing to a sense of 'stuckness' in the here-and-now.

In conclusion, this chapter has explored the profound desire for a future that extends beyond the confines of protracted refugee existence. It has led us back to the poignant sense of being 'stuck' in a liminal space, where opportunities for local integration are limited, the prospect of returning to Burma/Myanmar remains elusive, and traumas of past displacement and violence continue to haunt the present. But even this 'stuckness' can be dynamic – participants regularly expressed a prevailing sense of decline and diminished opportunities compared with the past. This is attributed to various factors, including funding shortages and the gradual reduction of legal and administrative space over the past few decades, further exacerbated by Covid-19 and the coup d'état. Humanitarian decisions to reallocate funds to Burma/Myanmar and shift focus to returns before the 2021 coup d'état in the face of widespread scepticism from refugees themselves have also contributed to this dynamic. In other words, youth in the camps are not just 'caged' – that cage is getting smaller.

Faced with these shrinking opportunities, our participants' narratives vividly convey the tension between envisioning a better life 'in the world' and the harsh realities of a life in the camps devoid of opportunity and agency. In such circumstances, escape to a third country appears increasingly to be the only viable option, despite their earnest efforts to navigate their circumstances within the camps with dignity.

8 Conclusion

This research set out to explore two main factors: first, identifying the aspects of life that encamped youths in protracted crises deem crucial for their wellbeing, and second, assessing the alignment of these priorities with what humanitarian actors consider significant.

Our findings reveal that the concept of wellbeing in Mae La and Nu Po refugee camps is multifaceted. Sociocultural aspects of life such as sports and play, cultural events, weaving traditional clothing, religious observance and stewardship of the natural world all play an important role in young people's efforts to achieve wellbeing – many of which fall largely beyond the scope of what humanitarian actors deem important. Many of these elements are also instrumental in fostering social networks, which are critical both in their own right, and in allowing youth to tap into resources and opportunities. These networks are all the more important in an environment where the provision of assistance has been significantly scaled back in recent years, a trend which has highlighted the tension between aid providers' assessment of the biological requirements for life and refugees' subjective experience of hunger and need. Education and vocational training still provide vital ways for youth to work towards a better future, but opportunities to access them are often limited to those who know the right people. Worse, in an environment where freedom of movement and the right to work are heavily limited, these opportunities can end up being disappointing dead ends rather than realistic pathways to self-reliance and fulfilment. In this context, options for the future are looking increasingly limited: opportunities in Thailand are shrinking, young people have little sense of agency or voice in the events that impact their lives and the possibility of return to Burma/Myanmar has been all but eliminated by the ongoing military coup. In these circumstances, young people feel caught in a shrinking cage, with the remote possibility of third-country resettlement increasingly seeming like the only way out.

It is important to acknowledge here that humanitarian actors working to support Karen youth are sensitive to and acknowledge many of these challenges – indeed, many have lived experience of them as Karen refugees themselves. Many of the dynamics eroding youth wellbeing in the camp are fundamentally linked to issues beyond the control of humanitarian programming and policy, whether in terms of the complex politics of local integration in Thailand, the Burma/Myanmar government's ongoing and brutal war against its own people, or the growing global disparity between humanitarian need and funding available. Nevertheless, the study's findings point to a number of implications both for this specific context and for humanitarian responses in protracted crises more broadly.

Enabling environments and non-linear processes

Findings of this study highlight the complex ways in which different aspects of life contribute to wellbeing. The example of sport and play is critical here. While providing an immediate psychosocial benefit in terms of a distraction from the daily grind of camp life, participating in sports activities also has a wider set of knock-on effects in terms of facilitating sociability and social networks, as well as strengthening a sense of visibility and voice. These could in turn potentially feed into further outcomes in terms of greater access to information and opportunities, and greater youth engagement in refugee civil society. This echoes findings from previous studies, which have highlighted the ways that activities supposedly beyond the scope of humanitarian and development programming can ultimately end up contributing to more utilitarian objectives. For example, Arora (2019) documents the contribution play and recreational activities in online spaces can make to learning or livelihoods outcomes. These links are non-linear and hard to fit into a logframe or measurement framework. They thus speak to the importance of trying to identify and support enabling environments – internet access is another example here – that can help people to pursue wellbeing and meaning, with potentially compounding positive impacts on different aspects of their lives.

Reassessing relevance and effectiveness in difficult circumstances

Young people's complex experiences of education and vocational training in the camps outline the way that support designed to help move beyond survival can run into a wall when faced with a restrictive context that prevents skills and knowledge being converted into meaningful opportunities. This challenges actors providing assistance to think creatively about what effective and relevant support actually looks like in practice (see also Sturridge et al., 2023). In terms of education, research on adolescent experiences of protracted displacement highlights the importance of looking beyond curricula to student-centred learning that focuses specifically on equipping young people with the 'flexibility and "cognitive mobility" to cope with long-term uncertainty' (Jones et al., 2021: 5), while human rights education can also offer ways to help strengthen youth participation and voice. Here, Feldman (2018) and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, et al. (2021) point to the role that facilitated processes focused on reflection or creativity can play in helping youth grapple productively – and politically – with some of the unresolvable tensions between efforts to live with dignity in the present while futures seem closed off.

From a different perspective, thinking about effectiveness may also involve considering what affected people feel is most important in interventions. From a purely economic perspective, livelihood activities centred around traditional weaving methods may not be especially impactful owing to the substantial barriers to running a successful small business in the camps. But the value weaving has in terms of preserving Karen culture and sustaining an increasingly precarious link to pre-displacement life in Burma/Myanmar is also clearly significant from a wellbeing perspective and should not be overlooked (see also Carpi et al., 2021, on the under-appreciated social importance of livelihoods programming).

Meaningful participation is key

Agency is repeatedly emphasised by both the findings of this study and the wider literature as a critical component of wellbeing for young people in particular. This means ensuring that young people have a say in decisions that affect their lives, especially when their interests and aspirations may differ from both those offering assistance and others in their communities. Support for local actors is one important aspect here. The study's findings show that groups run by and for refugees, such as the KRC, the KWO, the Karen Student Network Group and the KYO, take a more holistic view of ‘what matters’ that is likely to be more in line with young people’s pursuit of wellbeing than that of other actors – for example, in prioritising the maintenance of recreational spaces, or supporting weaving.

Just as important is finding ways to make sure young peoples’ voices are heard and amplified. As studies elsewhere have shown (e.g. Daigle, 2022), shifts in social norms and roles following displacement can open up new opportunities (and new threats) for previously disadvantaged populations, and the growing voice of Karen refugee youth in camp society is a case in point. Where it is appropriate for them to do so, aid actors should seek to support young people’s voices, whether through the kinds of interactions they have with affected populations, or through identifying opportunities in the types of programming and activities they support.

Wellbeing is a rights issue

Ultimately, many of the barriers to youth wellbeing in this study amount to a question of rights. Denial of the right to work, the right to move, the right to access education, or even the right to hold cultural celebrations are political choices and are challenging in nature – over decades of displacement, the landscape for young people in Thailand has only become more restrictive. While humanitarian actors in Thailand have been working hard to advocate on behalf of refugees on these issues, this serves as a wider reminder that wellbeing is linked not just to people’s immediate material needs, subjective experiences, or relations within their communities, but ultimately sits within a wider political landscape of rights upheld, or rights denied.

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Humanitarian Policy Group
ODI
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7922 0300
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7922 0399
Email: hpgadmin@odi.org
Website: odi.org/hpg