Layers of Limbo: Governing Vulnerable & Displaced Populations in Thailand

Professor Patrick Cottrell and Students: Morgan Christiansen, Bridget Grant, Kole Kracaw, Leanne McCallum, and William McHenry

Abstract:
In Thailand, the international community is confronted by one of the most protracted and complicated migration crises in the world. By examining this complex issue from the vantage point of a variety of stakeholders – the Royal Thai Government (RTG), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other international organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations (CBOs), and donor governments (e.g. the United States) – our project aims to illuminate the divergent, all-times contradictory, incentives that undermine cooperative efforts to find ‘durable solutions’ to protect vulnerable populations over the longer term. The project then draws from literature on experimental forms of governance to evaluate alternative pathways to overcome collective action problems that could have both theoretical and policy implications.

Methodology:
The larger research design employs a “hull and spoke” organizational model. Each student researcher chose a single particular aspect of governance of forced migration in Thailand (see abstracts), produced individual literature reviews prior to fieldwork in order to provide the context necessary to collect and analyze primary source data – primarily from over 30 elite interviews with a range of stakeholders involved in the governance of vulnerable populations. This design has the advantage of allowing for individual specialization, while ultimately strengthening the team’s understanding of the central research question through the identification of cross-cutting themes and the analysis of the theoretical and policy implications thereof.

The Resource Curse: Development Displacement in Burma

Although the Burmese refugee crisis has long been driven by the political oppression of ethnic populations, many observers overlook the critical dimension of development displacement. As one of the most resource-rich countries in Asia, Burma’s development trajectory has been marked by displacement, both intentional and accidental, resulting in the evacuation of millions of internally displaced persons and refugees. These research efforts in the summer of 2012, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining the question: is the UNHCR necessarily the lead institution in the world’s most protracted refugee crisis? For example, the study argues that the current model of durable solutions; 2) to determine the degree of impartiality and ambition of humanitarian organizations working within the Burmese refugee crisis; and 3) to examine the effect this has on achieving a solution. Based on the extensive interview experience and officials from many of the organizations worked in this issue, the study argues that the “durable solutions” are misleading and fall under “false solutions.” The paper ultimately contends that the humanitarian community has failed those it attempts to protect with respect to all three categories of study. The durable solutions are impaired and home the issue such that the refugees are themselves the problem, which inherently cripples any possible chance for a real solution.

Burmese Refugees: Rethinking Durable Solutions

The discourse surrounding the Thai/Burma refugee crisis routinely invokes the humanitarian language of ‘resource-rich’ and ‘durable solutions’ (or ‘sustainable coexistence’ in its popular consequence). Its specific aims are to: (1) to access the practicality of the three durable solutions; (2) to examine the critical displacement and development of humanitarian organizations working within the Burmese refugee crisis; and (3) to examine the effect this has on achieving a solution. Based on the extensive interview experience and officials from many of the organizations worked in this issue, the study argues that the “durable solutions” are misleading and fall under “false solutions.” The paper ultimately contends that the humanitarian community has failed those it attempts to protect with respect to all three categories of study. The durable solutions are impaired and home the issue such that the refugees are themselves the problem, which inherently cripples any possible chance for a real solution.

Exploitation, Inc.: Labor Trafficking in Southeast Asia

Many observers associate human trafficking with the sex trade. Although sex trafficking remains a serious problem, such a narrow view of labor trafficking, which constitutes approximately 70% of the total trafficking population worldwide. This problem is particularly pronounced in Asia, where 30% of total global labor trafficking cases are located. Drawing on 20 semi-structured interviews conducted in the summer of 2012, the study examines the conditions that allowed labor trafficking to flourish in Southeast Asia, with an emphasis on the forced labor problem in Thailand. It identifies the key factors that have fueled labor trafficking in the region: the role of regional migration patterns, push and pull factors fueled by poverty and economic opportunity, and the Thai government’s insufficient response to human trafficking. It concludes by highlighting some key precursors to counter-trafficking efforts in Thailand.

Is the Backseat Better? The History of the UNHCR on the Thai-Burma Border

As the international organization responsible for governing refugee affairs, the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) is typically granted a considerable amount of authority in refugee crises. However, given that Thailand in and of itself the 1951 Refugee Convention and the unique historical origins of the Burmese refugee crisis, the UNHCR has been forced to take on a much broader role than along the Thai-Burma border. Within much of the literature on human rights and governance of the UNHCR, the one question is not “is the UNHCR necessarily the lead institution in the world’s most protracted refugee crisis?” The study suggests that a more restricted UNHCR role may, in fact, have significant upshots because it undermines the organization’s potential to both influence the flow of refugees and direct financial and material resources to the refugees themselves. Given the protracted nature of the Thai-Burma refugee crisis and the unique political and historical context in which this unfolds, NGOs have become a leading role in governing refugee affairs along the Thai-Burma border. Over time, these NGOs developed an alternative model for refugee governance that offers a more comprehensive and institutional aid models used across the world. This study examines the nontraditional community-based management (CBM) approach to refugee governance found along the Thai-Burma border, where NGOs work in partnership with the refugee community through capacity building programs that enable refugees to self-govern. These models can provide the framework for NGOs to effectively manage the camps, distribute food, and run the camp justice system. Drawing wide interviews with relevant NGOs, IOs, and aid agencies in Thailand, this study explores the potential for person-centered development and localized efforts in refugee governance. While the findings suggest that the CBM approach is less effective in both the short- and long-term than traditional, top-down models of humanitarian assistance. Given the protracted nature of the Thai-Burma refugee crisis and the unique political and historical context in which this unfolds, NGOs have become a leading role in governing refugee affairs along the Thai-Burma border. Over time, these NGOs developed an alternative model for refugee governance that offers a more comprehensive and institutional aid models used across the world. This study examines the nontraditional community-based management (CBM) approach to refugee governance found along the Thai-Burma border, where NGOs work in partnership with the refugee community through capacity building programs that enable refugees to self-govern. These models can provide the framework for NGOs to effectively manage the camps, distribute food, and run the camp justice system. Drawing wide interviews with relevant NGOs, IOs, and aid agencies in Thailand, this study explores the potential for person-centered development and localized efforts in refugee governance. While the findings suggest that the CBM approach is less effective in both the short- and long-term than traditional, top-down models of humanitarian assistance.