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Border Risks and Partnership Gaps in Rohingya Irregular Migration to Malaysia

Risiko Sempadan dan Jurang Kerjasama dalam Migrasi Tidak Teratur Rohingya ke Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Rohingya irregular migration to Malaysia by focusing on destination preference, entry pathways, journey-related risks, and partnership gaps in border governance. Although Malaysia does not formally recognize refugees, it remains an important destination for Rohingya displacement due to religious affinity, employment expectations, and the role of transnational social networks. The study aims to identify the factors shaping Malaysia as a preferred destination, the main irregular routes used, the risks experienced during transit, and the partnership weaknesses that continue to sustain vulnerability. A qualitative multi-site design was employed, involving 20 participants comprising Rohingya respondents and enforcement personnel. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion conducted in Kedah, Penang, and Kuala Lumpur between July and October 2025, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that Rohingya movement into Malaysia occurs through land, sea, and limited air routes, with smuggling agents playing a central role in organizing mobility, financing, and transit. Risks are produced throughout the migration process, including debt, overcrowding, coercion, abuse, food deprivation, and unsafe border crossings. Read through the lens of Sustainable Development Goal 17, the study finds that these risks persist not only because smuggling networks are adaptive, but also because cooperation across institutions and communities remains fragmented. The article argues that reducing harm requires more coordinated, trusted, and accountable partnership arrangements in Malaysian border governance.

Keywords: Rohingya; Irregular Migration; Border Governance; Partnership Gaps; Malaysia

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini meneliti migrasi tidak teratur Rohingya ke Malaysia dengan menumpukan kepada faktor pemilihan destinasi, laluan kemasukan, risiko sepanjang perjalanan dan jurang kerjasama dalam tadbir urus sempadan. Walaupun Malaysia tidak mengiktiraf pelarian secara formal, negara ini kekal sebagai destinasi penting bagi perpindahan Rohingya disebabkan oleh pertalian agama, jangkaan peluang pekerjaan dan peranan rangkaian sosial rentas sempadan. Kajian ini bertujuan mengenal pasti faktor yang membentuk Malaysia sebagai destinasi pilihan, laluan tidak teratur yang paling banyak digunakan, risiko yang dialami semasa transit serta kelemahan kerjasama yang terus mengekalkan kerentanan. Kajian ini menggunakan reka bentuk kualitatif pelbagai lokasi yang melibatkan 20 peserta terdiri daripada responden Rohingya dan pegawai penguat kuasa. Data dikumpulkan melalui temu bual mendalam dan satu perbincangan kumpulan fokus yang dijalankan di Kedah, Pulau Pinang dan Kuala Lumpur antara Julai hingga Oktober 2025 serta dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa pergerakan Rohingya ke Malaysia berlaku melalui laluan darat, laut dan dalam kadar yang terhad melalui udara dengan ejen penyeludupan memainkan peranan penting dalam mengatur mobiliti, pembiayaan dan transit. Risiko terbentuk di sepanjang proses migrasi termasuk hutang, kesesakan melampau, paksaan, penderaan, kekurangan makanan dan kemasukan sempadan yang tidak selamat. Melalui lensa Matlamat Pembangunan Mampan 17, kajian ini mendapati bahawa risiko tersebut berterusan bukan sahaja kerana rangkaian penyeludupan bersifat adaptif, tetapi juga kerana kerjasama antara institusi dan komuniti masih diintegrasikan. Artikel ini berhujah bahawa pengurangan mudarat memerlukan kerjasama tadbir urus sempadan Malaysia yang lebih terselaras, integrasi, menyeluruh dan berakauntabiliti.

Kata kunci: Rohingya, Migrasi Tidak Teratur, Tadbir Urus Sempadan, Jurang Kerjasama, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia remains one of the major host contexts for refugees and asylum seekers in Southeast Asia. UNHCR's public registration data show that, as of end October 2025, 211,360 refugees and asylum seekers were registered with UNHCR in Malaysia, with 189,760 originating from Myanmar and including a large Rohingya population (UNHCR 2025). These figures reflect registration capacity rather than total arrivals, but they still indicate the scale and policy salience of forced displacement in Malaysia.

Despite the visibility of Rohingya displacement, scholarship and policy debate in Malaysia have tended to focus more on drivers of flight, legal status, and post-arrival vulnerabilities than on the practical organization of irregular entry and the specific risks produced along the journey and at entry points (Nazri et al. 2022). This is a consequential gap. Irregular entry is not only a border-control issue. It is also a protection issue because movement often depends on brokers, debt arrangements, and transit spaces where coercion can occur. Risk therefore accumulates through interactions among migrants, intermediaries, local communities, and enforcement institutions rather than arising from individual choice alone (Khairi et al. 2024). Recent regional evidence on migrant smuggling in Southeast Asia also underscores that smuggling routes intersect with other forms of organized harm, and that exploitation risks can increase in transit when people lack safe reporting channels, documentation, and protection mechanisms.

This article examines how Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers enter Malaysia through irregular pathways and what risks they face en route, then interprets these findings through Sustainable Development Goal 17 as a partnership governance lens (Putri & Gabiella 2022). SDG 17 emphasizes that complex policy outcomes require effective partnerships across sectors and stakeholders, including public, private, and civil society actors. In SDG architecture, Goal 17 explicitly highlights multi-stakeholder collaboration and shared capacity as means of implementation (Sulaiman et al. 2019). This framing is relevant to border governance because border outcomes depend not only on enforcement intensity but also on coordination across agencies, safe information exchange, and credibility of protection pathways for vulnerable people.

The article makes three contributions. First, it provides an empirically grounded mapping of irregular entry pathways used by Rohingya respondents, distinguishing route typologies across land corridors at the Malaysia–Thailand frontier, sea movements to the northern coastline, and a limited air pathway shaped by document facilitation. Second, it conceptualizes risk as produced across stages of movement through three interacting mechanisms, financial exposure through debt and escalating fees, coercion and confinement in transit sites, and enforcement-driven route adaptation that shifts risk spatially rather than eliminating movement. Third, it operationalizes SDG 17 for border governance by identifying partnership mechanisms that can plausibly reduce harm while supporting governance objectives, with attention to safe information sharing, trust-building, cross-sector referral pathways, and integrity safeguards aligned with COPE-informed publication ethics expectations.

This article is guided by four research questions concerning Rohingya destination preference for Malaysia, the irregular entry pathways used and their adaptive shifts, the risks experienced along the journey, and the partnership gaps that continue to sustain these vulnerabilities within the Malaysian border governance context. It begins with a review of the relevant literature on Rohingya displacement, irregular migration, border governance, and SDG 17. The article then explains the qualitative methodology, presents the main findings and discussion, and concludes with the article's contributions and policy implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing literature on Rohingya displacement has consistently linked irregular movement to structural exclusion, statelessness and political violence in Myanmar. Historical studies show that Rohingya rights were progressively curtailed through administrative controls, restrictive citizenship policies and exclusionary state practices (Haq, Othman, & Mat 2022). After the consolidation of military rule in the 1960s, successive legal and bureaucratic measures increasingly framed the Rohingya as noncitizens. This exclusion was further institutionalised through the 1982 citizenship law, which deepened statelessness and contributed to repeated waves of forced movement (Khairi, Ahmad, & Zainal 2023). From this perspective, Rohingya irregular migration should not be interpreted as voluntary mobility alone, but as movement produced by long-term political marginalisation and insecurity.

A second body of literature examines regional mobility and onward migration from Myanmar and Bangladesh. Bangladesh has often functioned as the first country of arrival due to geographic proximity, especially through the settlement of Rohingya refugees in and around Cox's Bazar (Tan 2024). However, conditions in refugee camps, limited livelihood opportunities and uncertainty over durable solutions have encouraged onward movement to other Southeast Asian destinations. Such movement often occurs through mixed regular and irregular channels. Studies on irregular migration in Southeast Asia show that the distinction between smuggling and trafficking is frequently blurred, particularly when mobility depends on debt arrangements, coercion, captivity and exploitation in transit sites (Molla, Chowdhury, & Muhibbullah 2026). This literature is important because it shows that risk is not confined to the moment of border crossing. Instead, risk accumulates across the migration journey through financial dependency, physical insecurity and unequal power relations between refugees and intermediaries.

A third strand of scholarship focuses on Malaysia as a preferred destination for Rohingya refugees. Despite the absence of a formal domestic refugee law, Malaysia continues to be perceived as a viable destination due to religious affinity, perceived cultural proximity, employment expectations and the presence of established Rohingya social networks (Bari et al. 2024). These factors reduce uncertainty for prospective migrants by providing information, contacts and expectations of survival after arrival. However, the same networks can also become connected to intermediaries who organise transport, documents and onward movement. Literature on Rohingya mobility shows that transnational networks can therefore operate in two ways. They may provide social support and reduce uncertainty, but they may also increase vulnerability when migration fees escalate, repayment is enforced through threats or violence and refugees are confined in exploitative transit conditions (Rafa, Khalid, & Uddin 2024).

A fourth area of literature concerns border governance and irregular entry. Border studies suggest that irregular migration is shaped not only by migrant decisions or smuggling networks, but also by the institutional environment in which borders are governed. Borders are not merely territorial lines. They are complex spaces involving multiple enforcement agencies, local communities, informal corridors and cross-border economic incentives (Chowdhury et al. 2022). When enforcement is intensified at formal checkpoints, movement may shift towards less visible routes, including rural crossings, forest paths and maritime alternatives (Rajaratnam & Azman 2022). This produces a risk displacement effect. Control measures may alter the location and method of movement without necessarily eliminating irregular migration. As a result, stronger enforcement can sometimes push refugees towards more dangerous routes when protection-sensitive coordination is weak.

Malaysia's official enforcement perspective also frames irregular entry through the language of border security, immigration control, maritime surveillance and transnational crime prevention. The Ministry of Home Affairs Malaysia identifies border security, maritime security, undocumented migrants and migrant smuggling as key concerns within the national domestic security agenda (Ministry of Home Affairs Malaysia 2021). This position is reinforced through Malaysia's National Action Plan on Anti-Trafficking in Persons 2021–2025, which links trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling to prevention, enforcement, protection and inter-agency coordination (Ministry of Home Affairs Malaysia 2021). These official policy documents are important because they show that irregular migration is not treated only as a humanitarian issue, but also as a matter of national security, border management and institutional coordination.

These bodies of literature provide useful insights, but they also reveal an important gap. Existing studies have explained the structural causes of Rohingya displacement, the vulnerabilities of Rohingya refugees in Malaysia and the humanitarian consequences of statelessness. However, less attention has been given to how irregular entry into Malaysia is practically organised, how risks are produced across different stages of the journey and how partnership weaknesses within border governance sustain these vulnerabilities. In particular, there remains limited empirical discussion on the relationship between route adaptation, smuggling intermediaries, enforcement practices and inter-agency or community-based cooperation.

To address this gap, this article adopts Sustainable Development Goal 17 as a conceptual lens. SDG 17 frames partnerships among governments, civil society, communities, academia and the private sector as essential to addressing complex policy challenges (United Nations 2015). In the context of border governance, SDG 17 is analytically useful because it treats coordination, trust, information sharing and accountability as central governance variables. Rather than interpreting border risks only as a result of weak enforcement or smuggling activity, the SDG 17 lens directs attention to how cooperation structures are designed, how safe reporting and data governance are enabled and how protection mechanisms support participation (Rajaratnam & Azman 2024). This framing is particularly relevant where border risks intersect with humanitarian vulnerability, because effective governance requires both control capacity and safeguards that reduce harm.

Thus, this study contributes to the literature by linking Rohingya irregular migration, border risk and partnership governance in a single analytical framework. It argues that irregular migration risks persist not only because smuggling networks are adaptive, but also because cooperation among institutions, communities and protection actors remains fragmented. This approach allows the article to move beyond a narrow focus on enforcement and toward a broader understanding of border governance as a problem of coordination, trust and accountable partnership.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, multi-site research design to examine irregular entry pathways used by Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers, the risks experienced across the migration journey, and the operational perspectives of border enforcement personnel in Malaysia. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the organisation of irregular movement, route selection, payment arrangements, coercion in transit, and encounters with enforcement are shaped by perception, informal practices, and lived experience that cannot be adequately captured through aggregate or administrative data alone.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 20 participants. The sample comprised 12 Rohingya respondents and 8 enforcement personnel. The Rohingya participants were selected since their direct or closely observed experience of irregular movement, smuggling arrangements, transit risks, and post-arrival survival in Malaysia. The enforcement group comprised personnel with operational knowledge of border control and migration interception, including officers from immigration, maritime enforcement, and related border security functions. This combination of respondent groups was intended to capture both migrant-centred and enforcement-centred perspectives on entry pathways, route adaptation, and risk production.

Fieldwork was conducted between July 2025 and October 2025 in Kedah, Penang, and Kuala Lumpur. These sites were selected to reflect distinct but connected dimensions of Rohingya movement into and within Malaysia. Kedah was included because of its relevance to the northern land-border corridor and cross-border movement linked to the Malaysia–Thailand frontier. Penang was included as a northern coastal and transit context connected to maritime arrivals and onward movement. Kuala Lumpur was included as an urban destination node where Rohingya refugees and asylum seekers seek employment, social support, and access to documentation or registration-related pathways. Taken together, the three sites allowed the study to capture different stages and geographies of irregular migration.

Data collection combined in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion using semi-structured guides. The interview protocols covered destination choice, the organisation of travel, payment and debt arrangements, experiences in transit, forms of coercion or exploitation, and encounters with patrols, inspections, or interception. This design enabled the study to document not only route typologies, but also how respondents interpreted risk, safety, trust, and survival throughout the migration process.

Interviews were conducted in English, Malay, and Rohingya as appropriate to the respondent. Where necessary, interpretation support was used to facilitate communication. All interview materials were translated into English for analysis through a documented translation process that included translator briefing and spot-checking to preserve meaning consistency across languages. This was important because the study relied on narratives involving vulnerability, mobility, and coercion, where subtle differences in wording could affect interpretation.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. Transcripts and field notes were coded iteratively to identify recurring patterns related to destination preference, route organisation, payment structures, transit conditions, enforcement encounters, and partnership gaps in border governance. Coding was guided through a working codebook that was refined through repeated reading and comparison across cases. Analytic memos were used to track interpretive decisions and emerging relationships between themes. Themes were then compared across respondent groups to triangulate migrant accounts with enforcement perspectives and to distinguish route-level risks from broader governance-related vulnerabilities.

Ethical safeguards were applied throughout the study because the research involved a vulnerable population and sensitive subject matter. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. To reduce the risk of harm, all respondents were anonymised and are reported using coded identifiers, namely R1 to R12 for Rohingya respondents and E1 to E8 for enforcement personnel. Identifying biographical details, names of specific smugglers, and operationally sensitive procedures were removed or generalised in the presentation of findings to protect confidentiality and reduce risks of traceability, retaliation, or misuse of information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings through a set of analytical categories derived from the interview and focus group data. The discussion is organized into five interrelated themes which are destination preference, smuggling intermediaries, entry pathways, journey-related risks, and enforcement-driven route adaptation. This structure is used to reduce descriptive repetition and to show how Rohingya irregular migration to Malaysia is shaped by the interaction between individual survival strategies, smuggling networks, border enforcement and partnership gaps in governance. Across the interviews, five key patterns emerged. First, Malaysia was constructed as a preferred destination because of religious affinity, perceived employment opportunities, family reunification and existing Rohingya social networks. Second, smuggling intermediaries played a central role in organizing mobility, arranging payments, selecting routes and controlling transit. Third, Rohingya movement into Malaysia occurred through land, sea and limited air pathways, each involving different costs, risks and forms of concealment. Fourth, journey-related risks were not confined to border crossing alone, but accumulated through debt, overcrowding, coercion, food deprivation, confinement and abuse in transit. Fifth, enforcement pressure shaped route adaptation, as smugglers shifted between maritime, land and forest routes to avoid detection. These themes show that irregular migration risk is cumulative and relational rather than a single event at the border.

DESTINATION PREFERENCE

Interview narratives suggest that destination choice is shaped by three recurring factors. These include perceived religious and cultural safety, the enabling role of smuggling intermediaries, and the pull of existing social networks in Malaysia (Abdul Hai et al. 2022). Malaysia has become one of the preferred destinations for Rohingya refugees for at least three main reasons. The first is religion. Several respondents perceived Malaysia as a safer destination because it is a Muslim-majority country where they could practice Islam more freely. One respondent explained that he preferred Malaysia because he felt safer in an Islamic country than in Myanmar. Another similarly noted that the presence of mosques and the ability to pray without disturbance influenced his decision to migrate. As one Rohingya respondent (R1) explained, “When I decided to flee Arakan (Rakhine), I chose Malaysia because it is an Islamic country. I felt safer being in Malaysia than remaining in Myanmar.” Another Rohingya respondent (R2) similarly explained that he chose Malaysia because he perceived it as an Islamic country where the presence of many mosques would allow him to practise his faith without disturbance.

The second factor concerns the role of smuggling agents who facilitate the movement of Rohingya refugees from their places of origin to Malaysia. This was reflected in an interview with a Rohingya respondent (R3), who described relying on an intermediary to leave Arakan:

> “When I decided to flee Arakan in 1995, a friend informed me that there was an agent who could help arrange the journey. For a payment of about RM500, I was transported overland and entered Malaysia through the northern border route. I was afraid to take this path, but I had no other way to save myself.”
>
> (Informant R3)

In addition, some agents facilitate the entry of Rohingya refugees into Malaysia through maritime routes. This was described by a Rohingya respondent (R4), who recounted his journey by sea:

> "I arrived in Malaysia by sea after travelling with other Rohingya passengers on a boat arranged by agents. The journey took about two weeks before we reached the northern coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Upon arrival, agents were already waiting to transfer us onward in search of work ."
>
> (Informant R4)

The third factor concerns the role of transnational social networks between Rohingya refugees in Malaysia and Rohingya communities in Myanmar. One Rohingya respondent (R5) explained that encouragement from village friends already residing in Malaysia, together with information on religious affinity and employment opportunities, shaped his decision to migrate:

> "I came to Malaysia after being encouraged by friends from my village who were already here. They told me that Malaysia is an Islamic country and that job opportunities were available. One of them also helped me find work in the construction sector."
>
> (Informant R5)

In addition, one Rohingya respondent (R6), who had lived in Malaysia for an extended period, described migration as a staged family survival strategy shaped by financial constraints:

> "I went to Malaysia without my wife and children because I did not have enough money to bring them with me. While in Malaysia, I worked to save enough to bring them later. My wife and son now live with me. I am grateful that we are together, even though I had to pay thousands of Ringgits."
>
> (Informant R6)

Based on the above statement, there are Rohingya people who are already in Malaysia to invite friends, villagers, acquaintances, and family members to come to Malaysia because the living conditions in this country are better than the situation in their country of origin.

While a small number of Rohingya had arrived in Malaysia before 1990, the first major wave of Rohingya refugee movement to the country occurred in stages in the early 1990s, especially between 1992 and 1996. As reflected in the accounts of respondents R6 and R7, this outflow was closely associated with Myanmar government operations between 1990 and 1992, which subjected the Rohingya to persecution, serious human rights violations, and conditions that compelled them to flee to neighboring countries, including Malaysia. Therefore, it can be known that the wave of Rohingya refugees will occur when there is a policy from the Myanmar government that complicates the living conditions of the Rohingya and the implementation of large-scale operations against them as well as racial riots carried out by Myanmar's Buddhist majority population (Martuscelli, Ahmed, & Sammonds 2024).

The last massive wave of Rohingya refugees lasted until early 2016 based on the Myanmar government's policy of withdrawing placement documents while the Rohingya people caused them to despair of living there. However, starting in 2016 and 2017, the wave of Rohingya refugees did not occur and only a few cases were reported to successfully detect the presence of Rohingya people intending to enter Malaysia (Muzafarkamal & Hossain 2019).

There are three ways for Rohingya refugees to enter Malaysia, namely by land, air, and sea. When the first Rohingya refugees entered Malaysia en masse in the 1990s, they used the road. Most of them use the services of agents who are from Myanmar, Thailand, and Malaysia (Mahaseth & Banusekar 2022). As indicated by respondents R8 and R9, the journey usually lasts between two and three weeks, although the exact duration depends on the circumstances of travel and the strategies adopted by the agents involved. In many cases, travel time is prolonged because agents seek to minimize detection and avoid arrest by authorities, especially during border crossings.

The price charged in the 1990s era was around RM500.00 to RM1,000.00 per person (Wahab 2018). According to respondent R10, the cost of agent-facilitated movement has increased over time. From 2010 onwards, many Rohingya refugees reportedly had to pay between RM2,000 and RM6,000 per person, placing significant financial pressure on households. In some cases, this forced families to sell or pawn their remaining assets in order to fund migration from Myanmar to Malaysia.

In addition, some Rohingya refugees finance their departure through borrowing from friends, acquaintances, relatives, and family members to pay the agents involved in facilitating their exit from Myanmar. According to respondent R11, those who are unable to pay the full amount upfront may be placed under alternative payment arrangements by the agents. One common arrangement requires them to work in Thailand after leaving Myanmar in order to repay the migration-related debt. Respondent R12 explained that Rohingya refugees placed under deferred payment arrangements usually work for six months to one year in order to repay the agent before being transported onward to Malaysia. During this period, they are typically absorbed into low-wage and labor-intensive sectors, including fishing, retail, agriculture, livestock work, and construction.

The second scheme is that the agents will take them directly into Malaysia and then the Rohingya refugees will pay the cost of the agent's services in monthly installments for about three years when they get a job in the country (Farzana et al., 2020). According to enforcement officers E1 and E2, some agents pursue excessive profit through coercive practices while Rohingya refugees are held in jungle-based smuggling transit camps along the Thai-Malaysian border. These practices include threats against family members and acquaintances in Malaysia or Rakhine to extract further payment. Where such demands are not fulfilled, refugees may face violence, intimidation, and confinement in makeshift cages constructed from forest materials.

As a result of the persecution perpetrated by these agents, there are Rohingya refugees who die in transit camps due to injuries and illnesses they suffered. When there are Rohingya refugees who die then the agents will bury them in a large burial pit (Welton-Mitchell et al. 2019). For female Rohingya refugees who have a relatively attractive appearance, they will be used as a place to indulge their lust by smuggling agents. While some smuggling agents engage in coercive and abusive practices, enforcement officer E3 observed that others act in a comparatively more reliable manner and show some concern for the welfare of Rohingya refugees under their control. Such conduct appears to be shaped less by humanitarian motives than by the desire to preserve reputation and sustain future demand within Rohingya social networks.

ENTRY PATHWAYS

When Rohingya refugees want to enter Malaysia by road, they will do so from the north of Peninsular Malaysia which borders Thailand. There are three main locations that are the route for Rohingya refugees to enter Malaysia, namely through Bukit Kayu Hitam (Kedah), Padang Besar (Perlis) and Sungai Golok (Kelantan) (Tan et al. 2018). Apart from these three areas, there are other areas that are the entry point for Rohingya refugees to Malaysia by road such as in Wang Klian (Perlis) and Rantau Panjang (Kelantan). However, such routes are not a priority for smuggling agents due to the hilly terrain and the tight border security controls by the authorities.

Among these three routes, the Bukit Kayu Hitam area is the most important route because it is the choice of smugglers to bring in Rohingya refugees to Malaysia (Chandran et al. 2020). According to enforcement officer E4, smuggling agents commonly attempt to move Rohingya refugees across the Malaysian border at night to minimize detection by the authorities. This may involve the use of informal crossing routes created through breaches or weak points along the Thailand–Malaysia border fence. However, E4 also noted that some operations rely on concealment rather than irregular foot crossings, with Rohingya refugees hidden in vehicle compartments and transported through immigration checkpoints. As enforcement officer E4 explained, "Some agents were suspected of making illicit payments to certain border personnel in Thailand and Malaysia to facilitate the cross-border movement of Rohingya refugees. In some cases, they succeeded in evading Malaysian immigration controls, while in others they were intercepted and detained by the authorities."

Next, there are smuggling agents consisting of Malaysians who will wait in areas around the Malaysian border such as Bukit Kayu Hitam and Changlun (Kedah) to bring Rohingya refugees to major cities in Malaysia to make it easier for them to get jobs (Nungsari et al., 2020). According to enforcement officer E5, some Rohingya refugees also use air routes to enter Malaysia in addition to land and maritime pathways. These movements generally originate either from Bangladesh or directly from Myanmar. E5 explained that such journeys are often organized through agents who handle flight arrangements and related logistics, although in some cases Rohingya refugees can travel without intermediaries through assistance provided by friends or family members.

For Rohingya refugees departing from Bangladesh, they must cross the national border between Rakhine (Myanmar) and Teknaf (Bangladesh) via a river. The agents will offer consolation to the border guards to facilitate their affairs to enter Bangladesh (Rusli et al. 2021). Upon arrival in Bangladesh, Rohingya refugees will wait for a period of one day to one week as agents need time to make fake Bangladeshi passports and ticket purchase arrangements to be given to Rohingya refugees (O'Brien & Hoffstaedter 2020). When all these arrangements are successful then the Rohingya refugees will board a flight from Dhaka or Chittagong to Kuala Lumpur (KLIA).

As enforcement officer E6 explained:

> "In some cases, Rohingya refugees entered Malaysia by air using short-term tourist visas, often with travel arrangements made under Bangladeshi identity documents. After arriving in Kuala Lumpur, some moved to Klang Valley in search of employment. Once their temporary travel documents had expired, some were reported to have abandoned those documents and later approached the UNHCR office in Malaysia to seek refugee registration. However, this route was not commonly used because the cost was relatively high, ranging from about RM8,000 to RM15,000 depending on the agent involved."
>
> (Informant E6)

E6 added to his explanation that many Rohingya refugees relied on maritime routes to reach Malaysia because travelling by sea was generally less costly than other available options. Between 2011 and 2016, boat travel was reported to be the most used mode of movement among Rohingya refugees heading to Malaysia. E6 further noted that, in many cases, passengers pooled their money to pay for passage arranged by agents, with individual costs typically ranging from RM500 to RM2,000 depending on the terms set by the intermediary. Departures were commonly organized from coastal areas in western Myanmar and the Bangladesh-Myanmar border zone.

JOURNEY-RELATED RISKS

The duration of the voyage to Malaysia is about two weeks and travel by sea is the most challenging for Rohingya refugees. This is because they must sail across the Bengal Sea, the Andaman Sea before reaching the Straits of Malacca in Peninsular Malaysia and must go through hot weather and rough sea conditions (Nisa 2019). In addition, the load limit of the boats boarded by Rohingya refugees is smaller than their number and causes congestion in the boats because they must squeeze into each other. Rohingya refugee boats were found indicating that the number of passengers was more than the limit of the capacity of the boat (Sullivan 2016).

For example, if the boat has a capacity for 200 passengers, then about 400 people have boarded the boat and cause congestion in the boat. Respondent R1, who had travelled by boat to Malaysia, described the severe overcrowding that often-characterized maritime journeys arranged at low cost. According to R1, passengers were forced into highly congested conditions in order to minimize expenses paid to boat owners and agents. Such overcrowding created serious health risks, particularly for older passengers, some of whom reportedly died during the journey due to breathlessness, exhaustion, and the overall physical strain of the voyage. R1 further indicated that, when deaths occurred at sea, the bodies were wrapped and disposed of overboard because of the limited space available on the boat.

Furthermore, the supply of food and beverages brought was limited and the agents did not provide a supply of medicines. This situation has resulted in some Rohingya refugees falling ill due to overcrowding, fatigue, heat, and illness and some of them died on the way (Tazreiter et al. 2018). The peak of the wave of Rohingya refugees fleeing by boat to Malaysia was around 2015 when more than 25,000 people comprising men, women, the elderly, children, and infants were detected in the North Straits of Melaka near Langkawi Island, Kedah (Tay et al. 2019).

ENFORCEMENT-DRIVEN ROUTE ADAPTATION

There are some Rohingya refugee boats heading to Aceh, in the northern part of the island of Sumatra, Indonesia. This happened when the results of the report of the Indonesian and Malaysian authorities who went to conduct investigations and rescue operations found that most of the boats had damage in terms of engines and ran out of fuel to sail (Netto et al. 2022). In addition, there were reports that the Tekong and the agent who took them on board the boat had fled using an emergency boat when they learned that there were authorities from Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia who managed to detect the presence of their boat (Arshad & Islam 2018).

According to enforcement officer E7, smuggling agents changed their strategy in response to tighter maritime surveillance, particularly from Thai authorities. Instead of sailing directly from Bangladesh or Myanmar to Malaysia, they increasingly restricted the sea journey to Thailand before moving Rohingya refugees' overland through forest routes into Malaysia. As E7 noted,

"Tighter monitoring at sea made direct movement to Malaysia more difficult, so agents increasingly used Thailand as a transit point before bringing the Rohingya in through forest routes to avoid detection."

This pattern was also reflected in the Focus Group Discussion with Rohingya refugees. Participants described a journey in which the maritime leg ended in Thailand before the overland movement continued through forest routes into Malaysia. One FGD participant explained:

> "In 2014, we fled to Malaysia by boat and each of us paid the agent RM3,000. The boat departed from the Rakhine coast and was extremely crowded. After about seven days at sea, the agent stopped in Thailand. From there, we were taken through the jungle on foot. The agents gave us very little food, mainly dry bread and instant noodles. We walked for three days and three nights before entering Malaysia at night through an informal border route. Throughout the journey, we were afraid, but we had no choice except to obey the agent because we feared being beaten."
>
> (FGD)

This enforcement perspective is consistent with official Malaysian border and maritime security statements that emphasize surveillance, patrols, interception and inter-agency coordination in responding to irregular maritime and land movements. The Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency has framed suspected irregular sea arrivals as matters requiring maritime patrol, monitoring and operational response, particularly in northern waters close to Langkawi and the Straits of Malacca (Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency 2018, 2024). Similarly, police reporting on migrant smuggling has linked irregular entry to organized syndicates, payment arrangements and cooperation between foreign and local actors (Royal Malaysia Police 2023). These official positions help contextualize the enforcement officers' accounts in this study, particularly their emphasis on route adaptation, concealment, interception and the continuing contest between smuggling networks and border control agencies.

Although the agents changed tactics to bring Rohingya refugees to Malaysia, they are still at risk of being detained by special authorities at the Malaysian border because border authorities such as the military, Border Security Agency, police, and immigration regularly conduct regular patrols and inspections (Chan 2017). Nevertheless, the use of irregular land routes did not ensure safe or successful entry into Malaysia. As E8 observed, Malaysian enforcement authorities were at times able to intercept both Rohingya refugees and the agents involved in facilitating their movement, especially along the Malaysia–Thailand border. This indicates that while smuggling networks remained adaptive, they were not immune to state surveillance and interdiction. E8 cited a 2015 incident in which military patrols apprehended Rohingya refugees and their agents during an attempted border crossing, before transferring them to the immigration authorities and police for further action. The incident is significant because it illustrates the continuing contest between enforcement capacity and smuggling adaptation within Malaysia's border governance landscape. As E8 explained:

> "Although some agents succeeded in bringing Rohingya refugees into Malaysia, others were intercepted during the crossing process. In one 2015 case, military patrols along the Malaysia–Thailand border detained both Rohingya refugees and the agents accompanying them before handing them over to the immigration authorities and police for further action."
>
> (Informant E8)

This subsection discusses the study findings through the lens of Sustainable Development Goal 17, which foregrounds partnerships as a core instrument for addressing complex policy challenges and improving implementation capacity across institutions and sectors (United Nations Statistics Division 2023). In border settings, irregular movement and smuggling-related harms are not single-sector problems. Rather, they cut across humanitarian protection, public security, public health, livelihoods, labor exploitation, and the local political economy of border communities. The evidence presented in this study suggests that the persistence of border risks is shaped not only by the adaptability and capability of smuggling networks, but also by the strength, credibility, and institutional design of cooperation among the actors operating around the border (Hossain, Ullah, & Mohiuddin 2022). In this sense, SDG 17 provides a useful analytical lens because it shifts attention away from enforcement alone and towards the quality of multi-actor coordination that underpins effective border governance.

From an SDG 17 perspective, the border should be understood as a multi-stakeholder ecosystem rather than merely a territorial line to be guarded (United Nations 2017). Relevant actors include state institutions responsible for security, immigration, administration, and law enforcement, as well as local communities, informal social networks in border settlements, civil society and humanitarian organisations, transport and logistics intermediaries, and official or unofficial counterparts across the boundary. Each of these actors possesses only partial information and distinct operational capabilities. Partnership becomes valuable when it reduces fragmentation, aligns incentives, clarifies institutional roles, and establishes predictable channels for information exchange and joint action. The findings of this study illustrate how gaps between jurisdictions and organisations are repeatedly exploited. As reflected in the accounts of E4, E6, E7, and E8, when enforcement is tightened at visible checkpoints or formal gateways, movements do not necessarily stop but instead shift towards less visible and more informal routes. Maritime journeys may be redirected through Thailand before overland entry into Malaysia, while land-based crossings may occur through forest corridors or informal breach points along the border. These adaptive patterns reinforce the core SDG 17 proposition that durable outcomes depend on coordination that spans organisational and jurisdictional boundaries rather than on isolated enforcement responses alone (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2024).

A central empirical theme emerging from the study concerns trust and the social legitimacy of cooperation. Partnership in border governance does not function effectively through formal structures alone. It also depends on whether actors believe that cooperation is credible, protective, and worth the risk of participation. Community participation, for instance, can serve as an important early warning layer, especially where residents or migrant networks possess information that is not readily available to state authorities. Yet such participation is only effective when relationships are perceived as safe and reciprocal. The evidence in this study suggests that irregular movement often continues through informal and concealed pathways because vulnerable actors do not necessarily trust formal mechanisms of intervention. The broader pattern reflected in the narratives of R1, R5, R6, FGD-R1, and E7 indicates that movement decisions are frequently shaped through personal networks, informal intermediaries, and survival calculations rather than through confidence in institutional protection. From an SDG 17 standpoint, this means that partnership cannot be understood merely as administrative coordination. It must also be grounded in trust, social legitimacy, and credible protective arrangements (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2025). Trust is produced through repeated interaction, consistent institutional behaviour, and safeguards that reduce the personal cost of disclosure. Without such

safeguards, cooperation becomes uneven, information circulates through informal routes, and the risks of misinformation, leakage, and non-reporting increase.

The findings also point to information sharing as a core instrument of partnership governance. Effective cooperation requires shared situational awareness and a capacity to convert fragmented observations into coordinated action. This can be operationalised through secure and standardised reporting channels, agreed criteria for triaging alerts, common thresholds for identifying suspicious patterns, and mechanisms for verifying information before intervention. In practical terms, a shared and auditable incident log could help convert ad hoc collaboration into a more stable institutional routine. In SDG 17 terms, this corresponds to strengthening implementation support, data capacity, and the quality and timeliness of information flows across stakeholders (United Nations Statistics Division 2024). The present study supports this view. As indicated by E4, E6, E7, and E8, smuggling routes evolved in response to enforcement pressure, suggesting that fragmented information environments create opportunities for intermediaries to exploit institutional blind spots. The evidence on changing sea-to-land strategies, the use of informal crossing routes, the concealment of migrants in vehicles, and the uneven success of interdiction all point to the need for more integrated information-sharing mechanisms. At the same time, information sharing itself creates risks, especially where the disclosure of movement patterns, identities, or local sources may expose vulnerable persons to retaliation or exploitation. Partnership arrangements therefore require clear data governance rules specifying who can access what information, under what conditions, for what purpose, and with what safeguards for privacy and safety.

Capacity building is another SDG 17 pathway strongly implied by the evidence. Cooperation at borders often fails not only because actors lack resources, but because they operate with different definitions of risk, different procedural expectations, and different professional lenses for interpreting suspicious activity. Cross-training can help reduce these gaps. It can align basic concepts, such as how suspicious movement is recognised, how incidents are documented, how risks to vulnerable populations are managed, and how follow-up actions are coordinated across agencies. Capacity building should also be understood as bidirectional rather than one-sided. Communities and vulnerable groups need risk literacy, knowledge of safe reporting practices, and awareness of the possible consequences of engaging intermediaries. Institutional actors, meanwhile, need stronger communication skills, contextual understanding of migrant vulnerability, and greater sensitivity to the social constraints under which communities operate. The importance of such mutual understanding is reflected indirectly in the study's findings. Respondents such as R1, R5, and R6 highlighted how religion, employment opportunity, and social networks shape destination choices, while E4, E6, and E7 highlighted how intermediaries exploit these motivations by structuring routes and movement strategies accordingly. This suggests that a partnership-based border approach must build not only technical capacity but also interpretive capacity, so that actors are better able to understand why people move, how they are recruited, and where intervention may be most effective.

SDG 17 also invites attention to accountability and integrity within partnership networks (United Nations Statistics Division 2025). This is especially important in border governance, where cooperation can either support protection and lawful management or become distorted by corruption, coercion, and discretionary abuse. The findings of this study underscore that risk economies often generate strong incentives for exploitation. As described by E1 and E2, some smuggling agents used threats, intimidation, physical abuse, and confinement in jungle transit camps to extract further payments from Rohingya refugees and their families. E4 further indicated

that some agents were suspected of making illicit payments to certain border personnel to facilitate movement across the Thailand-Malaysia border. Such evidence is analytically significant because it shows that border risks are not produced solely by migrant vulnerability or weak enforcement capacity. They are also shaped by integrity failures within the broader governance environment. For SDG 17 to be meaningful in this context, partnership must be supported by effective oversight mechanisms, including auditable records, clear separation of roles, complaint and reporting pathways, and protection for whistleblowers and informants. Without such safeguards, partnership may be reduced to rhetoric while discretionary and abusive practices continue beneath the surface.

The study also suggests that partnership should not be romanticised. Cooperation is not cost-free, nor is it automatically equitable. Partnerships can exclude weaker actors, reproduce existing asymmetries, or place the burden of reporting and risk management on already vulnerable communities. For this reason, SDG 17 should not be applied as a generic call for more cooperation, but as a framework for assessing the quality, fairness, and operational consequences of cooperation. In the present study, the significance of this point becomes clear when the findings are read across the full migration chain. Destination preferences were influenced by religion, employment opportunities, and social ties, as reflected in the accounts of R1, R2, R5, and R6. Journey organisation depended heavily on intermediaries and informal financing structures, as shown by R10, R11, and R12. Patterns of severe overcrowding, food deprivation, abuse, and coercive transit were evident in the narratives of R1, FGD-R1, E1, and E2. Route adaptation in response to enforcement pressure was highlighted by E4, E6, E7, and E8. Taken together, these findings indicate that irregular migration risk is cumulative and relational. It is produced across multiple sites and stages, which means that no single agency or sector can manage it effectively in isolation.

A further implication of reading the findings through SDG 17 is that border governance outcomes should be measured not only in terms of interdictions or arrests, but also in terms of the quality and sustainability of cooperative arrangements. Practical indicators might include response time to credible alerts, the frequency and quality of joint operations, the use and uptake of safe reporting channels, the completeness and consistency of case documentation, improvements in inter-agency coordination, and changes in community confidence over time. These indicators are important because they move the analysis beyond a narrow understanding of success as mere enforcement intensity. The case cited by E8, for instance, shows that interdiction can occur and that enforcement agencies do occasionally disrupt smuggling attempts. Yet the wider evidence also suggests that smuggling networks remain adaptive and capable of route displacement. This means that enforcement outcomes, while important, are insufficient on their own as indicators of governance effectiveness. A broader partnership-based framework is needed in order to assess whether institutions are becoming more coordinated, more trusted, and more capable of reducing harm.

Taken together, the study supports SDG 17 as a useful lens for interpreting border dynamics, while also showing that partnership requires more than formal collaboration agreements or occasional operational coordination. It requires sustained investment in trust building, protection mechanisms, shared information infrastructure, accountability safeguards, and continuous capacity development. Positioning the findings within SDG 17 therefore strengthens the article's contribution in two ways. First, it offers a conceptual shift from a narrow focus on enforcement intensity towards a broader analysis of governance quality and interdependence. Second, it shows that reducing vulnerability in the context of Rohingya irregular migration

depends not only on controlling movement, but also on improving the structure, integrity, and credibility of cooperation among the many actors who shape border outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

An SDG 17 reading of these findings points to practical partnership mechanisms for reducing vulnerability in the context of Rohingya irregular migration to Malaysia (United Nations 2015). The evidence suggests that border risks persist not only because smuggling networks remain adaptive, but also because coordination across institutions, communities, and reporting channels is still fragmented. This indicates that policy responses should move beyond enforcement alone and pay closer attention to the structure, credibility, and effectiveness of cooperation. A key implication concerns safe information sharing. As reflected in the accounts of E4, E6, E7, and E8, fragmented information flows create opportunities for smugglers to redirect routes, exploit weak points, and evade detection. More effective cooperation therefore requires standardised reporting channels that protect confidentiality, allow verification before action, and provide feedback that can sustain trust among relevant actors. Without such mechanisms, cooperation remains reactive and uneven. This also means that partnership-based border governance should be aligned with existing national enforcement and anti-smuggling frameworks. Rather than treating humanitarian protection and enforcement coordination as separate domains, official policy frameworks on border security, maritime control and anti-trafficking can be used to strengthen safer reporting channels, case documentation, referral mechanisms and inter-agency cooperation. Such alignment is important because irregular migration involving Rohingya refugees intersects with both vulnerability and enforcement concerns.

The findings also suggest that capacity building should be approached as cross-training rather than as a narrow institutional exercise. Border actors often operate with different understandings of risk, reporting, and protection, while communities may possess local knowledge but lack confidence in formal channels. A more effective partnership approach would align these practices and strengthen institutional understanding of the pressures that shape Rohingya movement, including religion, employment, debt, and social networks, as reflected in the accounts of R1, R5, R10, R11, and R12. Another implication is that partnership cannot function meaningfully without safeguards. The evidence presented by E1 and E2 shows that irregular migration routes are often embedded in coercive environments marked by abuse, intimidation, and extortion. Under such conditions, informant protection, secure complaint pathways, and confidentiality measures are not optional additions but operational necessities. Partnership without protection may appear institutionally sound, but in practice it remains weak because those with the most useful information may also face the highest personal risk.

The study further indicates that partnership performance should be assessed through indicators that go beyond arrests or interdictions alone. More meaningful measures include response time to credible reports, uptake of safe reporting channels, completeness of case documentation, and changes in community confidence over time. This is significant because the findings show that enforcement may disrupt crossings, but it does not by itself address the wider governance conditions that allow risk to persist and adapt. These implications show that the practical value of SDG 17 lies in shifting attention from enforcement intensity alone to the wider architecture of cooperation. Reducing vulnerability requires a border governance approach that is more coordinated, trusted, and accountable.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the factors shaping Rohingya destination preference for Malaysia, the irregular pathways used to enter the country, the risks experienced across the journey, and the partnership gaps that continue to sustain these vulnerabilities. The findings show that Malaysia remains a preferred destination because of religious affinity, employment expectations, and the role of social networks, while movement patterns remain highly dependent on intermediaries who continuously adapt routes in response to enforcement pressure. The study also demonstrates that risks are not confined to the point of border crossing, but are produced throughout the migration process through debt, overcrowding, coercion, abuse, and exposure to unsafe transit conditions. Read through the lens of SDG 17, these findings suggest that the persistence of border risk is shaped not only by the resilience of smuggling networks but also by weaknesses in cooperation across institutions and communities.

The significance of the study therefore lies in shifting the analysis beyond a narrow enforcement-centred perspective towards a broader understanding of border governance as a partnership problem involving trust, information sharing, accountability, and protection. In this context, more effective governance requires cooperation that is not only operational, but also credible, safeguarded, and responsive to the realities of vulnerability. The study contributes to ongoing debates on Rohingya irregular migration and Malaysian border governance by showing that reducing harm requires more than stronger controls alone. It requires a more coordinated, trusted, and accountable partnership architecture capable of addressing risk across the full migration pathway.

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