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# Governing Precarity: Humanitarian Retreat, Labour Reform, and the Politics of Self-Reliance for Refugees in Thailand

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As global refugee governance shifts toward development-oriented approaches, policy frameworks increasingly emphasize self-reliance, resilience, and economic inclusion while simultaneously justifying the withdrawal of assistance (Omata, 2023). Drawing on qualitative data collected between August and October 2025, this study explores how refugee communities in Thai border camps navigate the recent convergence of two major developments: the abrupt reduction of food and health assistance following international aid cuts, and the Thai Cabinet’s new labour scheme granting refugees conditional access to formal employment. Findings highlight three interrelated dynamics. First, the withdrawal of humanitarian assistance is destabilizing what refugees had long perceived as a moral contract of care, giving rise to intensifying feelings of abandonment and exposing the structural limits of protection within humanitarian governance. Second, although the labour reform is broadly welcomed as a potential pathway toward durable solutions, it simultaneously produces ambivalent forms of conditional autonomy, as newly granted work rights remain largely symbolic in the absence of essential structural supports—such as childcare, healthcare, or credential recognition—that would enable refugees to exercise these rights in substantive ways. Third, rather than conforming to neoliberal expectations of independence, refugee community-based organizations and religious networks are mobilizing local moral economies to sustain social cohesion through communal and relational forms of interdependence that counteract the pressures of aid retrenchment. The study contributes to critical debates of the humanitarian–development shift by demonstrating that, amid institutional

retreat, self-reliance is practiced as a collective ethic of survival that contests the responsabilizing logic of contemporary refugee governance.

**Keywords:** refugee protection; aid cut; labour reform; humanitarianism; protracted displacement; Thailand

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, the global refugee regime has shifted from protection-oriented humanitarian aid toward development-led approaches to refugee governance. This shift reframes the provision of aid—from a moral obligation rooted in care and protection—to a framework centered on economic productivity and operational efficiency. Thus, humanitarian agencies, once tasked with guaranteeing the right to subsistence, now increasingly focus on promoting market participation, self-reliance, and resilience among displaced populations (Easton-Calabria & Omata 2018; Ilcan & Rygiel 2015). With this paradigmatic reorientation, refugees are no longer seen primarily as recipients of care but as entrepreneurial actors responsible for their own recovery and integration (Brun, 2016; Omata, 2023).

Central to this transformation is the discourse of self-reliance, highlighted through frameworks such as the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR, 2018). Officially, UNHCR defines self-reliance as “social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet its essential needs in a sustainable manner and with dignity” (Leeson et al, 2020). While seemingly empowering, critical scholars argue that this definition operates within a neoliberal logic that celebrates autonomy while obscuring persistent structural inequalities (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). The assumption that refugees can achieve independence if simply given access to economic opportunity indeed fails to account for the complex realities of protracted displacement, where access to employment, legal status, and mobility remain severely restricted. Closely tied to this is the discourse

of resilience, another catchphrase that celebrates the ability of individuals or communities to adapt and recover from crisis without reliance on sustained external support (Omata 2023). Resilience constructs an ideal moral subject who endures uncertainty with fortitude, reinforcing a politics that individualizes risk and depoliticizes vulnerability (Brun 2016).

Nowhere are the contradictions of this shift more apparent than along the border of Thailand, home to approximately 90,000 refugees and one of the world's longest-standing refugee populations. Since 1984, the predominantly Karen refugee camps have functioned as emblematic sites of the humanitarian–development nexus. Within these camp communities, international agencies have long provided food, shelter, and education. Yet despite decades of programming, the camps remain in a state of legal and political liminality: neither fully integrated into Thai society nor guaranteed sustained international protection (Lee 2014; Yeo 2025). Recent transformations in the global aid landscape have intensified these longstanding conditions of uncertainty. For decades, the Thai–Myanmar border response relied heavily on international donors, most prominently the United States, which has historically been one of the largest contributors to the nine camps. Funding contractions over the past several years, however, have severely eroded the capacity of humanitarian agencies to uphold even minimal subsistence guarantees. Declining donor commitments have forced the Border Consortium (TBC), the primary provider of food assistance, to limit support to only the most vulnerable. At the same time, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) has been compelled to close several of its health facilities due to budgetary constraints (Root, 2025). This protracted funding crisis culminated in April 2025 when TBC announced a 40 percent reduction in food assistance following substantial international shortfalls. By July 2025, daily rations had fallen to the equivalent of just eight U.S. cents per person, prompting ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (2025) to describe the situation as a “collapse of humanitarian subsistence.”

Concurrently, in August 2025, the Thai government enacted a landmark labour scheme that granted refugees formal rights to work outside the camps. While mostly celebrated as a step toward durable solutions, it is introduced precisely as core humanitarian support was being withdrawn. This confluence of aid retrenchment and economic activation raises urgent questions about the evolving nature of protection in contexts of protracted displacement. Hence, this study examines how refugee community leaders and educators along the Thai–Myanmar border navigate the shifting moral and material foundations of humanitarianism. The research is guided by the following questions:

**RQ1:** How do refugees themselves interpret the idea of self-reliance in contexts where legal rights and material resources remain severely constrained?

**RQ2:** To what extent, and in what ways, are refugee-led community practices adapted or sustained when assistance is drastically reduced and redefined as dependency?

In addressing these questions, this article aims to contribute to critical debates on the neoliberal development shift by examining how self-reliance is enacted in conditions of deepening precarity.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The discourse of self-reliance has emerged as a defining paradigm in the governance of displacement, fundamentally reshaping the moral and operational boundaries of humanitarianism. Introduced as a corrective to the “care and maintenance” model that had long characterized refugee assistance, self-reliance is promoted by international institutions such as the UNHCR as both a normative ideal and an operational strategy (UNHCR, 2006; 2018; 2019; 2025). While it supposedly emphasizes autonomy, dignity, and sustainability, critical scholarship increasingly interrogates the structural contradictions and political implications of this

paradigm—particularly in contexts of protracted displacement where legal rights and livelihood opportunities are heavily restricted (Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015; Betts, Omata & Sterck, 2020; Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; Turner, 2016).

Historically, humanitarian assistance was grounded in a protective ethic of emergency relief. The so-called care and maintenance model, operationalized through camp-based systems, provided food, shelter, and basic services under the assumption that displacement would be temporary (Harrell-Bond, 1986). As displacement situations increasingly became protracted, often extending over decades, this model came under growing criticism for fostering dependency and limiting opportunities for meaningful social and economic participation (Jacobse, 2002). In response to these critiques, the early 2000s witnessed the emergence of the self-reliance paradigm as an alternative framework for refugee assistance. The UNHCR *Handbook for Self-Reliance* (2006) articulated a vision centered on economic autonomy and individual empowerment, marking a shift from humanitarianism as care to humanitarianism as development. Betts (2013) describes this transition as a reorientation of refugee governance toward logics of market participation and economic activation, a vision that was later institutionalized in the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR, 2018).

However, while self-reliance has been embraced as a humanitarian innovation, scholars have increasingly critiqued its underlying rationalities. Rather than simply being a neutral policy tool, self-reliance operates as a technology of governance grounded in neoliberalism, redistributing responsibility for survival from states and international actors onto the displaced themselves (Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015; Turner, 2016). Within this framework, the ideal refugee is reframed as an entrepreneurial subject: flexible, resilient, and economically productive. Omata (2023) and Easton-Calabria (2018) observe that such framing is often reinforced by resilience discourse, which naturalizes austerity by valorising individual adaptation over collective or structural protection. This rhetorical shift constructs a moral

economy in which failure to achieve self-reliance is attributed to personal deficiency rather than systemic exclusion, thereby producing binaries of “deserving” versus “undeserving” refugees.

Despite its normative appeal, the discourse of self-reliance often stands in stark contrast to the lived conditions in which refugees are expected to pursue it. Structural barriers such as legal precarity, restrictive employment regimes, and limited access to accredited education and public services frequently constrain the very possibility of achieving sustainable autonomy (Jacobsen, 2002; Hovil, 2007). As Betts et al. (2017) argue, without structural and holistic inclusion—such as legal recognition, formal labour access, and integration into national systems—“self-reliance” tends to manifest merely as survivalism under constraint. Chimni (2009) further critiques this trend as a form of depoliticization, in which the political dimensions of displacement are obscured by developmental framings that treat refugees as technical problems to be managed rather than as rights-bearing political actors.

This strategic retreat from long-term care is also visible at the macro level. Agier (2011) and Fassin (2011) describe contemporary refugee governance as a regime of humanitarian containment in which displaced people are confined both spatially and politically, often in peripheral zones marked by minimal state accountability. Within this regime, the discourse of self-reliance operates as a legitimizing narrative that allows international actors to scale down aid provision while retaining the appearance of promoting empowerment and sustainability. Brun (2016) conceptualizes such shifts as crises of care in which responsibility is rhetorically transferred to refugees at the same time that material support is withdrawn.

At the same time, self-reliance cannot be understood only as an externally imposed framework. Refugees actively negotiate, reinterpret, and sometimes resist the paradigms that shape their lives. Refugee educators and community leaders often

mobilize local strategies of survival and dignity that challenge the economic individualism embedded in official self-reliance discourse. Krause and Schmidt (2020) argue for an understanding of refugee agency that is embedded in local moral economies where care, solidarity, and collective responsibility constitute alternative modes of resilience. This perspective is echoed by Salem (2023) and by Yeo et al. (2020), demonstrating that refugee education functions not only as a strategy of daily survival but also as a deeply political practice that sustains cultural coherence, addresses the existential challenges of statelessness, and resists top-down models that overlook history, power, and meaning-making. Building on these theoretical perspectives, the following section outlines the methodological approach used to examine how these dynamics manifest within the Thai–Myanmar border camps.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2018) to explore how Karen refugee community leaders and educators interpret and navigate aid retrenchment and labour policy reform in protracted displacement settings. The case focuses on refugee camps on the border of Thailand and Myanmar, where long-term encampment, limited legal status, and recent shifts in humanitarian policy intersect to shape refugee experiences in complex ways. Originally, in-person fieldwork was planned in Mae La refugee camp and the nearby border city of Mae Sot. However, due to evolving security concerns, including recent trafficking incidents near the border, increased scrutiny of foreign access to camps, and official travel advisories, the research design was adjusted in close consultation with local gatekeepers. Direct entry into refugee camps was avoided. Instead, interviews were conducted either in person with Karen educators who were visiting Chiang Mai or remotely through Zoom or Facebook with participants based in refugee communities.

Data collection took place between August and October 2025, following ethical approval from the author’s institutional review board. Nineteen participants

were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling methods. Participants included refugee teachers, youth leaders, staff from community-based organizations, and community leaders with a minimum of three years of experience in refugee education or youth work. Particular attention was given to individuals affiliated with community-based organizations in Mae La who were directly involved in responding to humanitarian aid withdrawal or the Thai labour reforms. A total of twelve semi-structured interviews and seven focus group discussions were conducted, producing more than twenty hours of recorded data. Given the homogeneity of the participant group and the depth-oriented design, the sample was considered sufficient to reach data saturation. A triangulation approach enabled cross-validation of themes by integrating semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, community documents, and researcher fieldnotes drawn from both online and offline interactions. Interviews were conducted in English or Sgaw Karen with professional interpretation when needed. Each interview lasted approximately sixty minutes. Focus groups were organized by role group, such as teachers, community-based organization workers, or community leaders, with no more than four participants in each group and sessions lasting approximately ninety minutes. Discussion topics included reactions to food aid cuts and labour reforms, evolving notions of self-reliance, and community-led strategies under conditions of uncertainty. Due to fieldwork limitations and ethical considerations, participant observation was not conducted. However, informal conversations and contextual reflections were documented in researcher fieldnotes, which supplemented the formal data.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis. Coding and memo-writing were conducted using MAXQDA software to support analytic transparency and rigor. Reflexivity was embedded throughout the research process through critical journaling and ongoing dialogue with local collaborators, which enabled continuous interrogation of the researcher's assumptions, positionality, and interpretive decisions. Ethical considerations were

central to the research design. All participants received bilingual information sheets and provided written consent, with clear assurance of the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw at any time. Interviews were conducted in locations familiar or preferred by participants, and participants could skip questions or request alternate interview formats. Special care was taken to ensure the comfort and safety of women and younger participants, including the option of group interviews or the presence of same-gender interpreters upon request.

To protect confidentiality, all names used in this article are pseudonyms. Where appropriate, culturally meaningful honorifics such as Thra and Thramu, which denote male and female teachers in Sgaw Karen, were retained to preserve the social and linguistic context of participants' identities. Although some participants expressed a preference for being named, all identifying details were anonymized. Given the small and tightly connected nature of the Mae La camp community, additional steps were taken to minimize the risk of deductive disclosure, including the omission of detailed biographical information. A summary table is provided to offer basic contextual background for key participants whose narratives are directly quoted in this article.

**Table 1.** List of Key Research Participants

No.	Pseudonym	Gender	Role
1	Thra Nathan	M	Principal of a primary and secondary school
2	Thra Vincent	M	Camp Resident
3	Thra Joshua	M	Community Leader representing Karen Refugee Committee
4	Thramu Amy	F	Camp Resident
5	Thra Gabriel	M	Teacher of a higher education entity
6	Thra Oliver	M	Community Leader representing Camp Committee

7	Thramu Nora	F	Teacher of a secondary education entity
8	Thra Jason	M	Youth Leader representing Karen Student Network Group
9	Thramu Kelly	F	Teacher of a primary school
10	Thramu Sally	F	Teacher of a primary school
11	Thra Alex	M	Community Leader representing Faith-based higher education entity
12	Thra Daniel	M	Teacher of a primary school
13	Thramu Pim	F	Teacher of a secondary education entity
14	Thra Moses	M	Community Leader representing Karen Education and Culture Department

Source: Author

## 4. FINDINGS

### 4.1. *“NOT ABOUT BUDGET CUTS; IT IS A COLLAPSE OF HUMANITY” : EROSION OF THE HUMANITARIAN CONTRACT*

The space of the camp as an 'empty world' situated outside all places, and consequently the reified space of the border, is constructed in this context as a liminal space, a controlled between-the-two. And it is states themselves that define these 'no-place' spaces in relief, making them spaces of physical and material life maintained at a minimum, political voids and social voids without temporality (Agier 2011, p. 181).

As Agier (2011) theorizes, the refugee camp embodies a spatial and political formation where life is sustained at its bare minimum yet systematically excluded from the sphere of political rights. This captures the architecture of the Thai-Myanmar border regime that, for over four decades, has housed on average more than 90,000 Karen and Karenni refugees across nine camps. Since the 1980s, what began as temporary shelters established as an emergency humanitarian response has evolved into a long-term regime of managed containment that is sustained by what Fassin (2011) describes as a moral economy of care, an apparatus of compassion shaped by dependency, temporariness, and gratitude.

The collapse of food aid and the introduction of Thailand's 2025 refugee labour policy revealed how fragile this moral contract had become. In July 2025, the chairperson of ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) lamented, “This is not about budget cuts; it is a collapse of humanity” (APHR, 2025). Her statement captured a turning point in the moral governance of the border. When the United States abruptly terminated its decades-long funding to TBC and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), what followed was not a mere budgetary contraction but

the dismantling of an entire humanitarian infrastructure. By late July, TBC's food voucher programme, which had sustained roughly 90,000 refugees, was halted, and IRC closed seven of its nine clinics. As APCR (2025) reported, "only the most vulnerable will continue to receive minimal support," signaling what the organization described as the end of an ecosystem that had safeguarded life and dignity for more than thirty years.

This structural withdrawal exposed the moral limits of humanitarianism itself. The retreat of international aid produced not only material scarcity but also a profound sense of ethical betrayal among those who had long been conditioned to express gratitude. Camp-based leaders repeatedly invoked the language of abandonment to describe this moment. A school principal in Nu Poe camp explained, "Support in the camp has decreased, and there is nothing we can do about it. We cannot return either. If we go back, we will have more difficulties than we do now... We do not have any way of sustaining our livelihood on our own" (Thra Nathan, School Principal). His words capture the central paradox within the discourse of self-reliance: refugees are urged to become independent precisely at the moment when the institutional foundations that would make independence possible, including food security, healthcare, and education, are being dismantled. In this context, the call for autonomy functions less as a form of empowerment than as a moral transfer of responsibility from institutions to the displaced themselves.

The termination of TBC's food assistance and the International Rescue Committee (IRC)'s primary healthcare services on July 31, 2025 marked the most severe disruption since the camps were established, plunging refugees into unprecedented precarity. Food rations fell to the equivalent of roughly 77 baht (US\$2.30) per adult per month, an amount insufficient to meet even minimal dietary needs. Daily life in Mae La and Nu Poe was reorganized around scarcity, compelling residents to navigate a new moral calculus of worth and endurance. A visually impaired camp resident explained, "The decreased support has become a

challenge... It is difficult for people to survive without sufficient food. At the moment, many aspects are lacking support, including support for teachers” (Thra Vincent, Camp Resident). His observation illustrates the expanding reach of deprivation. It was not only food that had diminished, but also education and caregiving, which had previously functioned as the moral scaffolds of camp life.

In response to scarcity, camp administrators and committees implemented new rationing systems that formalized hierarchies of deservingness. A member of the Karen Refugee Committee noted, “They divided people into three kinds: the standard, the vulnerable group, and the most vulnerable. The standard people get nothing; only the very vulnerable still get food” (Thra Joshua, Karen Refugee Committee). What had once been a humanitarian principle of universal care was transformed into a bureaucratic taxonomy of conditional mercy. These categories, although presented as neutral, functioned as what Fassin (2011) terms the moral arithmetic of humanitarianism, a system that legitimizes inequality through the language of compassion. Those categorized as “most vulnerable,” including teachers, health workers, and dormitory students, remained eligible for limited rations. Meanwhile, “standard” families were expected to rely on kinship networks or informal labour to survive. As one Mae La resident stated, “To cope with the lack of support, we need to find other sources of income to have enough food” (Thramu Amy, Camp Resident). Within this reconfigured order, hunger no longer signified a failure of humanitarian protection. Instead, it became a test of moral character and adaptive capacity. The logic of endurance replaced the ethic of entitlement, and survival itself was reframed as evidence of self-reliance.

The disintegration of the aid infrastructure also destabilized the social fabric that had long held camp communities together. A teacher in Mae La camp recounted, “Since they stopped giving the ration two weeks ago, many things happened. Some people are using drugs, and some are stealing because they do not have food. They go to other houses and ask for food. It happened in our camp and I heard the same

things are happening in other smaller camps along the border” (Thra Gabriel, Teacher). Although these incidents were isolated, they illustrated how the moral economy of aid had regulated not only material distribution but also everyday social order. The cessation of rations dissolved shared routines such as queuing, monitoring visits, and collective cooking, all of which once structured daily life. In their absence, the camp became a site of improvisation in which norms were renegotiated, and survival increasingly became an individualized pursuit.

For some residents, however, the erosion of the humanitarian contract was not perceived solely as abandonment but also as a moment of moral reconfiguration. One teacher reflected, “Our leaders registered us with TBC... maybe we are in the most vulnerable group” (Thra Gabriel, Teacher). This reasoning illustrates Fassin’s (2011) concept of humanitarian government, a form of moralized administration in which life is valued differentially according to its capacity to elicit compassion. Within this regime, solidarity gradually gives way to competition, and collective suffering becomes fragmented into individual cases of eligibility. As a camp committee member summarized, “We just collaborate in the community and try to face the situation together. There are not many ways to deal with difficulties” (Thra Oliver, Camp Committee). His resignation reflects the normalization of austerity, where collaboration persists only as a fragile moral resource in the absence of institutional care.

The history of Mae La and Nu Poe as so-called temporary shelters had always rested on a fundamental contradiction. Refugees were designated as guests of a humanitarian state, yet their existence was indefinitely suspended in zones of legal exception. The 2025 food crisis stripped away the fiction of temporariness and revealed the extent to which humanitarianism had functioned as an instrument of containment rather than protection. As a teacher explained, “We are only able to allocate rice to those serving in essential roles such as health workers, teachers, and guards, just five kilograms per month. This will last perhaps two more months, until

November. For the wider refugee population, we cannot help” (Thramu Nora, Teacher). Her statement conveys both bureaucratic precision and moral fatigue. It reflects the quantification of care in the form of rationed ethics. The erosion of the humanitarian contract in 2025 thus did not simply mark a funding crisis within the community; it signified a deeper shift in the moral economy of displacement, where survival was recast as personal responsibility rather than collective right.

#### ***4.2. “WITH CONDITIONAL ALLOWANCE, WE REMAIN TRAPPED”: AMBIVALENCE TOWARD CONDITIONAL AUTONOMY***

Following the large-scale reduction of food aid, the Thai Cabinet approved a landmark labour policy in August 2025 that permitted refugees from the nine border camps to seek legal employment outside camp boundaries. This announcement signaled a historic shift in Thailand’s long-standing approach to refugee governance, indicating a transition from humanitarian care and containment toward state-regulated self-reliance and economic inclusion. It represented the first state-sanctioned effort to move beyond the decades-old “care and maintenance” model and to align refugee policy with developmental objectives. Widely celebrated by UNHCR and the National Human Rights Commission as a turning point in Thailand’s refugee management, the reform sought to integrate humanitarian protection with pragmatic pathways for livelihood. Yet the transition was accompanied by deep uncertainty, uneven readiness, and complex moral implications.

Community leaders acknowledged that legal employment could offer important long-term benefits but also raised concerns about its immediate social costs. A community leader in Mae La asked, “If many people go far outside the camp to work, who will take care of the children? Who will look after the youth if parents are gone?” (Thra Joshua, Karen Refugee Committee). His question reflected the

tension between economic autonomy and the social cohesion that had long sustained camp life. Similarly, the Executive Director of TBC described the Cabinet’s approval as “very good news” that could help refugees “live more independently,” while noting that “there are still groups, especially vulnerable populations, who will not be able to leave the camps and who will continue to need support.” These perspectives reveal the dual character of the reform. It expanded agency but simultaneously exposed persistent inequalities in the capacity of refugees to benefit from it.

The transition toward the labour scheme also posed significant practical challenges. Refugees with Thai language skills, accredited educational qualifications, or vocational training were better positioned to take advantage of the shift. In contrast, women caregivers, older residents, and persons with disabilities faced structural barriers that limited their access to employment. A teacher in Mae La explained, “Even with the opportunity to work, we still need support. We do not have our own land or certified education. We still need help” (Thramu Nora, Teacher). The uneven distribution of benefits underscored a critical limitation of the policy. Economic participation alone cannot substitute for the social, educational, and health infrastructures that sustain long-term independence.

At an operational level, the policy institutionalized what may be described as conditional autonomy. Refugees were granted the right to work, but only within the bounds of administrative procedures that required registration, health checks, and annual permit renewal. These bureaucratic mechanisms were widely understood as pragmatic and necessary, yet they also rendered autonomy contingent upon compliance. A youth leader in Mae La commented, “If the government lets us work properly, we can contribute. But without a holistic approach and only with conditional allowance, we remain trapped” (Thra Jason, Youth Leader). For many, the reform symbolized a shift in the meaning of care, from material provision to legal recognition. Freedom was negotiated through procedure rather than granted as an inherent right.

The 2025 labour scheme represents a pragmatic recalibration in Thailand's evolving moral economy of displacement. It attempts to reconcile humanitarian compassion with economic pragmatism and gradually aligns with the global self-reliance paradigm by promoting refugee agency while maintaining state oversight. Yet its promise of empowerment remains fragile without institutional mechanisms that can transform conditional autonomy into genuine inclusion. As refugees repeatedly emphasized, the right to work alone cannot secure dignity or stability without the means and protections required to exercise it. One teacher reflected, "Even with work, we still need care" (Thra Kelly, Teacher), capturing the enduring paradox of the reform. The policy ultimately exposes the tension between autonomy and abandonment, revealing that meaningful self-reliance for those in liminal spaces must rest not solely on individual capacity but on collective ethics and systems of care that support human dignity.

### ***4.3. "WE STITCH OUR LIVES TOGETHER WITH WHAT REMAINS": EMERGING COLLECTIVE RESPONSES TO PRECARIETY***

In the wake of the food aid withdrawal and Thailand's new labour policy, Karen refugees in the border camps began navigating a rapidly reconfigured moral and material landscape in which survival depended less on institutional protection and more on community-based improvisations of mutual support. Contrary to policy rhetoric that presents these shifts as steps toward self-reliance and economic inclusion, the interview data show that refugees understand and enact self-reliance not as individual autonomy but as a collective ethic of endurance and reciprocal responsibility. This ethic emerges precisely in the vacuum left by humanitarian retreat. Rather than signifying empowerment, these practices represent attempts to hold life together amid the erosion of an already fragile humanitarian order. As long-standing routines of distribution, care, and social regulation unraveled, refugees drew

on relational obligations, moral economies, and cultural institutions to rebuild forms of protection from below. These dynamics demonstrate that, in contexts of protracted displacement, self-reliance functions less as a transition toward neoliberal independence and more as a communal strategy for surviving abandonment.

The termination of food vouchers by July 2025 destabilized what refugees perceived as the final remnants of the “care and maintenance” model. With rations shifting from predictable monthly transfers to nothing for households classified as “standard,” everyday life became marked by uncertainty and the breakdown of social rhythms historically regulated by humanitarian infrastructure. A teacher reflected, “Since they stopped giving the ration two weeks ago, many things happened. Some people are using drugs, some are stealing because they do not have food. They go to other houses and ask for food” (Thra Gabriel, Teacher). His account exemplifies what Ican and Rygiel (2015) describe as the unintended moral consequences of responsabilization. As institutional governance withdraws, social disorder and moral judgment are redistributed onto the shoulders of the displaced. Yet many refugees resisted the fragmentation that scarcity often produces. A teacher explained, “We just collaborate in the community and try to face the situation together. There are not many ways to deal with difficulties” (Thramu Sally, Teacher). Her comment reveals a relational conception of responsibility that contrasts markedly with the individualized responsibility promoted by global self-reliance policy frameworks.

Livelihood improvisation became a central domain where communal norms superseded neoliberal expectations. Small-scale gardening, pig raising, and poultry keeping were common before the crisis, but their social significance shifted as humanitarian systems collapsed. A member of the Nu Poe camp committee explained, “I only do camp community work and raise some pigs, chickens, and grow vegetables” (Thra Oliver, Camp Committee). These practices were not primarily about market-oriented self-sufficiency but about mutual supplementation within kinship and neighbour networks. These exchanges reflected what Krause and

Schmidt (2020) identify as moral economies of displacement in which redistribution is governed not by formal rules but by reciprocal obligations embedded in social relationships. Such logics directly counter the global framing of self-reliance as labour market participation, instead emphasizing survival-through-relationality. A teacher summarized this shared ethic succinctly: “If we have a little bit, we share a little bit. If we receive something, we give something. We stitch our lives together with what remains” (Thramu Nora, Teacher). In this frame, self-reliance is not measured through independence but through the capacity to remain interdependent.

Religious institutions were equally central in sustaining what Fassin (2011) describes as the moral architecture of care. Churches, long at the heart of Karen communal life, became emotional, spiritual, and material safety nets that filled the vacuum left by humanitarian retreat. Statements such as “God will provide in His time” (Thra Alex, Community Leader) functioned not as passive resignation but as cultural interpretations that rendered suffering socially understandable and collectively bearable. These faith-based networks operated as moral infrastructures, identifying vulnerable households, organizing informal food-sharing, and re-establishing communal rhythms disrupted by the loss of aid. As a camp resident explained, churches “bring food or help when someone is struggling. They look for people who do not come to service” (Thra Vincent, Camp Resident). Consistent with Salem’s (2023) argument that refugee education and religious practice constitute political modes of survival, these networks sustained both material needs and collective coherence.

Educators emerged as prominent moral actors who resisted the responsabilizing logic of global refugee governance by reframing education as an act of collective care rather than a technical service. Despite the suspension of salaries, teachers continued to work voluntarily, motivated by a sense of duty to maintain stability for children amid structural abandonment. A high school teacher stated, “Even if there is no salary, we must teach, because the children look up to us” (Thra

Daniel, Teacher). Similarly, a middle school teacher warned, “If we stop teaching, everything will collapse. Children will have no future” (Thramu Pim, Teacher). These accounts illustrate a relational form of resilience in which teachers’ sustained, often unpaid labour maintains community functioning while simultaneously concealing the structural inequities and shifting responsibilities embedded in the new humanitarian landscape. Their commitment embodies an ethic of collective responsibility that diverges sharply from neoliberal expectations of individual productivity and self-management.

Efforts within the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) further demonstrate how self-reliance is practiced through ethnic and cultural continuity rather than neoliberal autonomy. As one KECD representative explained, “We will try to maintain Karenness as we have been pursuing so far for decades. We may add agriculture or vocational training to the existing curriculum, but we cannot drop our language and culture” (Thra Moses, KECD representative). His emphasis on identity preservation aligns with Omata’s (2023) observation that refugee agency must be understood within local moral worlds where dignity, belonging, and cultural coherence are central to navigating exclusion. For KECD, adapting the curriculum toward skills-based approaches is not equivalent to adopting a marketized vision of education. Rather, it is a pragmatic strategy to safeguard cultural reproduction while equipping youth to withstand worsening material conditions. In this sense, educational reform becomes a dual project that protects the collective future of the Karen community while negotiating the pressures created by shifting humanitarian and labour regimes.

Although Thailand’s recent labour policy granting refugees the right to work has been celebrated internationally as a landmark step toward economic inclusion, it also reveals the paradox of expecting autonomy without providing the institutional conditions that render autonomy viable. A community leader explained, “If the government lets us work properly, we can contribute. But without holistic support,

we face many obstacles” (Thra Jason, Youth Leader). His reflection echoes the critique by Betts et al. (2020) that when systemic barriers such as limited work authorization, weak access to documentation, restricted social protection, and inadequate support services remain unresolved, self-reliance becomes less a pathway to dignity or independence and more a form of survivalism under constraint. Rather than reducing dependency, the new labour policy has reinforced the necessity of communal safety nets. It illustrates a broader paradox in contemporary humanitarian governance in which self-reliance initiatives risk shifting responsibility onto refugees while leaving the structural foundations of precarity intact.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examined how Karen refugee community leaders responded to the dual pressures of humanitarian aid retrenchment and Thailand’s 2025 labour policy reform, offering a situated understanding of how global paradigms of refugee self-reliance are interpreted within a protracted displacement context. The findings point to a persistent gap between policy narratives that frame self-reliance as empowerment and the lived realities of increasing material scarcity. As noted in broader scholarship, self-reliance and resilience have become prominent “development buzzwords” in global refugee governance (Omata, 2023), yet their practical implications often vary significantly depending on the structural conditions in which they are implemented.

The abrupt termination of food assistance and primary healthcare services was widely understood by participants not merely as a budgetary contraction but as a disruption of what they perceived as an implicit moral contract of care. This aligns with critiques of the neoliberal turn in humanitarianism, which suggest that the self-reliance paradigm can shift responsibility downward from institutions to refugees themselves (Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015; Turner, 2016). Participants’ assertions that they must now “manage on our own,” despite restrictions on mobility, documentation, or

access to public services, reflect a situation consistent with what Chimni (2009) describes as the depoliticization of displacement, wherein systemic barriers become obscured by narratives of autonomy. In this sense, the findings resonate with Betts, Omata, and Sterck's (2020) argument that self-reliance may manifest as "survivalism under constraint" when structural supports remain insufficient.

Thailand's new labour policy further illustrates these tensions. While widely welcomed as a potential pathway toward greater economic inclusion, its implementation highlighted the limits of equating self-reliance with formal permission to work. Consistent with research on the structural dimensions of refugee labour market access (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018), participants reported that language barriers, caregiving responsibilities, lack of accredited qualifications, and limited transportation significantly constrained who could benefit from the reform. In this context, what might be termed conditional autonomy emerged: a form of inclusion that grants legal access to work yet remains contingent on administrative requirements and unevenly accessible resources. The findings indicate that the right to work alone is insufficient without social protection, recognition of prior learning, and mobility rights that make such opportunities substantively attainable.

At the same time, the study highlights how refugees enact self-reliance through collective and relational practices. While global policy frameworks formally recognize both individual and community dimensions of self-reliance, their operationalization often prioritizes individualized forms of economic participation. In contrast, participants consistently described self-reliance as emerging through communal support networks, moral economies of reciprocity, and culturally meaningful institutions. These findings echo Krause and Schmidt's (2020) conceptualization of refugee agency as embedded within local moral economies, and they parallel Salem's (2023) and Yeo et al.'s (2020) observations that refugee education and cultural practices can function as political and social anchors in contexts of exclusion. The continued commitment of teachers despite suspended

salaries, the role of churches in sustaining community life, and the maintenance of cultural and linguistic education all demonstrate forms of collective resilience that complicate market-oriented interpretations of self-reliance.

Overall, the study contribute to a nuanced understanding of how global shifts toward development-led refugee governance are experienced in localized settings. They suggest that while policy frameworks position self-reliance as a means of fostering dignity and sustainability, its effectiveness depends on the structural conditions that enable refugees to exercise autonomy in meaningful ways. As Agier (2011) and Fassin (2011) remind us, refugee governance is shaped by broader moral and political economies, and changes in aid or labour regimes can have far-reaching implications for social order, identity, and everyday life. For self-reliance initiatives to move beyond rhetorical commitment, they require comprehensive conditions that bridge the gap between policy and practice. These include accessible skills training and vocational pathways, adequate social protection systems such as healthcare and childcare, and coordinated governance structures that ensure legal rights translate into practical opportunities. Without such infrastructures, refugees risk remaining in a position where autonomy is formally granted but substantively limited.

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