

Irregular Networks: Bangkok Refugees in the City and Region, written by P. A. Palmgren, Journal of Refugee Studies, fet004, 2013.

<http://ucla.academia.edu/PeiPalmgren>

MMN recommends this article as it offers interesting insights on the capacity for agency refugees and asylum seekers possess in Thailand today and introduces new ways of approaching refugee crisis in such a context.

Keywords: urban refugees, networks, agency, subsistence strategies, displacement

Article Review

Irregular Networks discusses the workings of informal networks of Rohingya, Khmer Krom and Vietnamese refugees and asylum seekers in the city of Bangkok as they face the challenges of everyday life for irregular migrants in Thailand. After describing and analyzing the parallel networks of movement, support and information developed by these communities throughout time, the author argues that an alternative social geography has been created by those communities to replace the nonexistent state support system for refugees and asylum seekers in Bangkok.

The paper is based on a two year research project (2010 to 2012) conducted among the Rohingya community fleeing persecution in Burma/Myanmar as well as with the Khmer Krom and other refugee groups fleeing Vietnam to seek refuge in Bangkok. Neither the 1951 UN Convention nor the 1967 Protocol relating to refugee status have been signed by Thailand and the 1979 Thai Immigration Act leaves refugees outside temporary camps subject to immigration arrests and detention, as well as vulnerable to extortion.

Zygmunt Bauman has stated that mobility is becoming ‘the most powerful and most coveted stratifying factor’ in today’s world. Following this statement, the author starts by describing different networks of movement involved in the organization of asylum seekers and refugees’ journey to, or – in case of deportation to neighbouring countries – from Thailand.

The second section is devoted to the development of community based solidarity and subsistence networks that appear to have developed alongside that of the limited services provided by the Bangkok Refugee Centre (BRC) and the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS). Communities of migrants are therefore using social ties to raise funds or provide help with housing, work and other related matters. This support network ranges from neighbours providing leftover food, to religious actors offering financial support on an individual basis. The 2011 Bangkok flooding shows for example how the Khmer Krom community used its connections to local NGOs to organize financial support for its members when they were denied access to the city’s relief centres which were only open to people with a national identification card.

The third part of the paper explores the ways important information and knowledge are exchanged and spread through the different groups with the help of certain refugees who serve as links between NGOs and the wider community. The network can be used to relay information on ongoing raids to receive help from NGOs, to inform of policy updates, address health or financial issues, or even to guide newly arrived members of the community to relevant organizations that will be able to provide further guidance. Nonetheless, the author explains the limits of these informal networks due to the difficulty in verifying the accuracy of the information they relay as well as the number of people they reach.

In the final part of the article, Pei Palmgren offers an assessment of the agency these refugee groups possess as they constantly negotiate the boundaries of their alternative social geographies. Since the social networks developed by each community help them assess, move and cope with their current situations, agency here appears to be limited to subsistence strategies. A comparison with refugee actions in African countries, where the Refugee Convention and other local agreements constitute a legal framework for their claims,

show the limits of refugee agency in Thailand where asylum seekers and refugees are criminalized. The author thus concludes by suggesting future efforts to address refugee crises in the region should take into account these substitute geographies and adapt their approach to countries like Thailand where state apparatus fail to promote and protect refugee rights.