



PLAYING FOR PEACE

Myanmar’s Muslim minority, the Rohingya, are often referred to as the most persecuted people on Earth. With support from a UQ researcher, a Queensland NGO is now working with a refugee football team to better integrate Rohingya youths into Malaysian society, one goal at a time.

To the 59,000 Rohingya refugees living in Malaysia, the Rohingya Football Club is more than just a soccer team. The team’s yellow jerseys, which stand out against their foggy training ground on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur, represent a brighter and more empowered future.

The Rohingya Football Club was founded in 2015, and fast became a vibrant and vital part of the Rohingya refugee community in Kuala Lumpur. The Kick Project, a Brisbane-based non-government organisation, partnered with the refugee football club to help Rohingya youth better integrate into Malaysian society.

Anthropologist Dr Gerhard Hoffstaedter is a senior lecturer in UQ’s School of Social Science, and has spent more than nine years documenting the life of urban refugees in Malaysia. He is also an honorary advisor to The Kick Project, and helped the organisation establish their cooperation in Malaysia.

Dr Hoffstaedter was awarded an Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Research Award in 2014 to create the first comprehensive ethnography of Malaysia’s refugee and asylum-seeker population. This saw him complete extensive overseas fieldwork to produce a body of work detailing the largely undocumented lives of refugees in Malaysia.

“When I work with refugees in Malaysia, I’m there as a witness to their lives, and I have to place myself into the stories I tell to grasp the connections – the meaning that flits between my world and theirs,” Dr Hoffstaedter says.

“Friendships that I have developed across cultural, social, and political barriers have

allowed me to better understand refugee realities, and the external barriers placed upon them.”

Malaysia is known as a ‘first protection space’ for many refugees, as the nation recognises that the rights of refugees must be respected and their needs met, regardless of their means of arrival or status.

Despite this, Dr Hoffstaedter says that Rohingya refugees in Malaysia are routinely exploited, and many isolate themselves to avoid conflict. Refugee access to health care, education and employment is also extremely limited – a cause of profound hardship for Rohingya living in Malaysia.

“Access to work depends on refugee community networks and the availability of work, as well as their health, and whether they can actually work in often physically demanding jobs,” Dr Hoffstaedter says.

“Access to health care is problematic, too, especially when living outside of Kuala Lumpur. For children, access to education remains a top priority for parents.”

Dr Hoffstaedter’s findings were crucial to the development of The Kick Project’s evidence-based sports and community project, which aimed to empower with the region’s growing number of refugees. Through his study, Dr Hoffstaedter identified sport as a powerful community development tool that could connect Rohingya refugees to essential service-providers in Malaysia.

“The most pressing issue for Rohingya is community cohesion, representation and trust,” Dr Hoffstaedter says.

“All these issues can be addressed through sport for development – something that The Kick Project and its founder James Rose have been active in and passionate about for years.”

In addition to bridging gaps between local populations and refugees, Dr Hoffstaedter has found that sport can also help refugee groups connect with local refugee services and overcome social stigma.

“Sport can be a powerful tool to further social cohesion and overcome some of these debilitating identity politics.

“Anyone can play football, and with relatively little investment in terms of gear. You can play barefoot with no kit, and it is still an uplifting experience.”

Dr Hoffstaedter facilitated a funding submission in 2016 through the Australian High Commission, who were interested in supporting projects to help vulnerable minorities in Malaysia.

By applying the results of Dr Hoffstaedter’s body of refugee research, The Kick Project was successful in securing a grant from the Australian High Commission to fund a pilot soccer program with Rohingya refugees living in Malaysia.

In partnership with the Rohingya Football Club, the Kick Project provided the team with uniforms and equipment, funded a municipal training ground in Kuala Lumpur, and provided a mini bus to transport players to and from games.

The weekly matches provide an opportunity for the Rohingya to come together and exchange information about life in Malaysia,

such as job opportunities, refugee services, registration or a change in policy.

“The Kick Project aims to disseminate information and support services through the football games to the community, because it’s often not only the men who come to play – women and children also come along to watch,” Dr Hoffstaedter says.

“We are now working on establishing children’s and women’s teams so they too can become an active part of the football community.

“Rohingya FC as a football club was already quite powerful in what it represented and in its endeavours, but over the last couple of years it has grown into more than a football club. It has matured into the roles of representation, community organisation, and engaging with the world beyond the Rohingya community.”

The young football players roar triumphantly with each goal, and the home-game crowds cheer them on from the sidelines. In this jovial atmosphere, it’s easy to forget the horrors they have fled.

Life beyond the pitch

Since the 1970s, almost 1 million Rohingya have fled their homeland of Myanmar.

Their citizenship rights were stripped by Myanmar’s government in 1982, and more recently, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have been displaced due to widespread mass human rights violations. For the Rohingya, the situation is dire.

“Rohingya have suffered discrimination in Myanmar for decades. For instance, there are restrictions on who they can marry and how many children they can have, and they are excluded from education,” Dr Hoffstaedter says.

“In Myanmar, the Rohingya have been excluded from not just political life, but social life. The ethnic cleansing and slow genocide taking part now is the culmination of these policies.”

Displaced Rohingya often find themselves living in overcrowded flats without adequate shelter, food, water or sanitation.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 150,000 registered refugees are living in Malaysia. Of these, the Rohingya hold a majority at 59,000 – but many more remain unregistered.

“Resettlement is very slow, so not many Rohingya actually leave the area to safer countries like Australia and the United States. For the majority of the Rohingya, it’s a pretty dismal life wherever they are,” Dr Hoffstaedter says.

Kicking goals

The impacts of the Rohingya Football Club’s weekly matches extend far beyond the 90-minute game.

In addition to the vital sense of community fostered at the games, The Kick Project has also helped Rohingya become more firmly emplaced within Malaysia.

Today, the Rohingya Football Club is well-known within Malaysian sporting circles, and they proudly represent their ethnic heritage within broader Malaysian society. The pilot program has also served as a tool to open up a conversation about the human rights abuses in Myanmar.

“Football is a more palpable way for local media – and consumers of that media – to put a human face to the Rohingya. Who are the Rohingya? Well, it’s your local football club down the road; you can see them on Sunday playing against another club,” Dr Hoffstaedter says.

“Football is a place where people can come together and not worry about status, legal or otherwise, all those external identity issues, and focus on having fun and playing a game. This is one small example of one small group of people in a small country doing just that.”

Kick Project founder James Rose says Dr Hoffstaedter has been fundamental to the success of their pilot project with the Rohingya Football Club.

“We are so lucky that Gerhard agreed to become an honorary advisor to us. He was able to find us the right people in the Rohingya community, alert us to the already-existing Rohingya Football Club and to help us design the program to ensure we maximised our community impact with limited resources,” Mr Rose says.

“He steered us through some problems dealing with some of the inevitable internal politics in the Rohingya community, and he gets the value of sport having a prominent place in areas of peace, reconciliation and development.

“It’s been very rewarding and gratifying for us to have someone with such experience and knowledge provide us with the kind of insights we could never have generated ourselves.”

With the support of Dr Hoffstaedter and The Kick Project, The Rohingya Football Club has crafted a flag, an anthem, and most importantly, an identity. From this integral foundation, who knows what goals they will kick – both on the field and beyond.

The story so far:

1982: Myanmar introduces Citizenship Law that renders the Rohingya stateless in their homeland.

2009: Dr Hoffstaedter begins an anthropological study of urban refugees in Malaysia, and finds that the main issues for refugees are a lack of information about registration processes and refugee services. Through this study, Dr Hoffstaedter identifies sports as a powerful development tool for Rohingya refugee communities in Malaysia.

2012: Waves of deadly violence break out between the Rohingya Muslim-minority and the Rakhine Buddhist-majority, leaving 100,000 Rohingya displaced as a result. Many flee to neighbouring Bangladesh and some by boat to Malaysia.

2014: Dr Hoffstaedter is awarded an ARC Discovery Early Career Researcher Award for his project ‘Lives in limbo: An anthropology of refugee experiences in Malaysia’.

2015: A refugee soccer team, the Rohingya (National) Football Club, is formed in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to represent Rohingya people.

2016: Informed by his study, Dr Hoffstaedter partners The Kick Project with the Rohingya Football Club to help Rohingya youth better integrate into Malaysian society.

2016: The Rohingya Football Club plays their first friendly tournament with Malaysian social clubs from major Malaysian media companies ASTRO and Utusan Malaysia and TNB, Malaysia’s national electric utility company.

2016: The Kick Project receives funding from the Australian Government for a soccer pilot program to boost Rohingya community development in Malaysia.

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(Image credit: image supplied by Dr Gerhard Hoffstaedter)

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