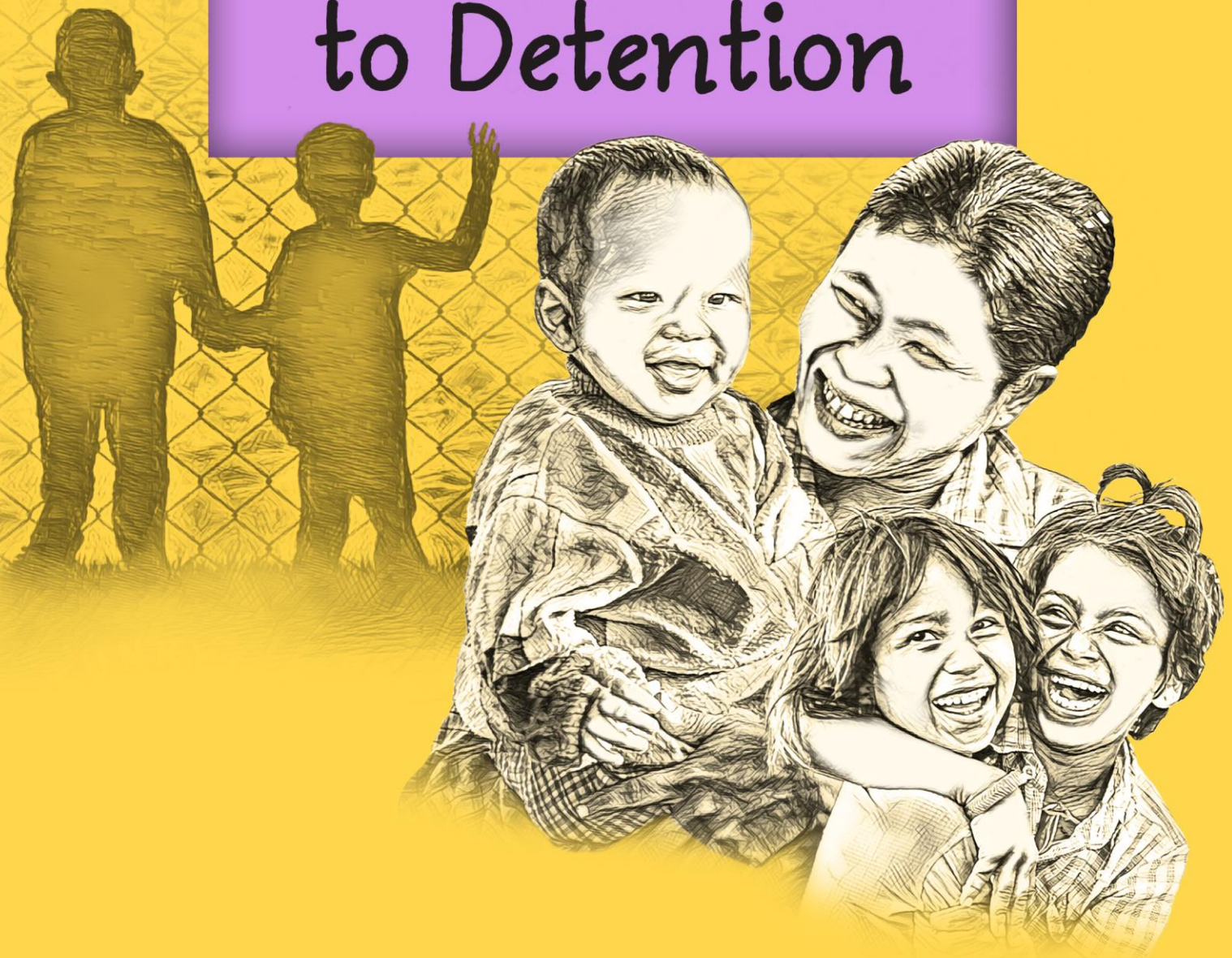


Alternative to Detention



SUKA Society advocates for Alternatives to Detention initiatives to protect unaccompanied and separated minors. This report details the project's progress and impact from 2025.

Report Overview

Content	Page Number
Foreword	2
Executive Summary	3-4
Programme Overview	5-7
Advocacy	8-9
Facilitation of Activities for Children in Detention	10-11
Building Foundations for ATD in Sabah	12-14
Training for Immigration Officers	15
Programme Expenses	16

Foreword

As a child protection NGO, we aim to develop an effective and sustainable programme where children will never need to be placed in detention. We are pushing for family-based alternatives and case management, as it is always in the best interest of the child when they are under the care of families. In doing so, children affected by immigration detention can be safe from abuse, neglect, and exploitation; grow up in stable and nurturing family environments; obtain long term durable solutions in regard to their immigration status; and access all their well-being and developmental needs.

To achieve this, we have been working collaboratively, especially with the government and in close coordination with civil society, to pilot ways in which children can be released from immigration detention centres into the care of civil society in Malaysia. The goal of this pilot project is to develop a practical and scalable model for alternatives to detention for children that can be effectively implemented in the longer term and integrated into national frameworks and structures.

In recent years, we have seen a positive shift in government policies that prioritise the well-being of children, especially unaccompanied and separated minors. Efforts to improve their well-being, despite still being limited, can be seen. We are also in constant discussion with key stakeholders from both NGOs and the government on how ATDs can be implemented, and active steps involving the development of SOPs and guidelines are being taken in that direction.

Beyond advocacy, our involvement in providing child protection training for immigration officers and delivering direct therapeutic and educational support for children in Baitul Muhabbah opens opportunities to make an impact in the lives of children currently affected by detention. To build upon the knowledge and understanding of the issue, we have also conducted our own research on Building Foundations for Community Based Alternatives to Detention for Children Affected by Immigration Detention in Sabah and have been actively contributing to the conversation on ATDs in the region as well.

Every milestone achieved in our advocacy journey inches us closer towards creating alternatives that would prevent children from being detained and therefore protect them from the trauma it will cause.

Anderson Selvasagaram
Executive Director



A child's drawing from a session in Baitul Mahabbah, depicting herself and her best friend.

Executive Summary

In 2025, our main activities were centred around engaging the government to develop community-based ATD for unaccompanied children in detention and facilitating activities in Baitul Mahabbah Nilai.

At Baitul Mahabbah Nilai, SUKA Society conducted a total of 81 sessions of activities for children and mothers and continued to monitor the conditions at the centre. As our partners Yayasan Chow Kit and Humankind made the decision to withdraw their services due to lack of progress on the exit policy for asylum-seeking children from the centre, we initiated psychosocial sessions with mothers to fill in the gap. We also connected Baitul Mahabbah centres in Sabah, Kedah and Johor with local NGOs who would be able to provide similar activities for children.



A Child Protection Sensitisation Workshop was conducted for 16 officers in Baitul Mahabbah Johor. One of the workshop's key goals was to shift the officers' mindsets from playing an enforcement to a protection role. This final workshop marks a completion of this training cycle which started in September 2023 targeting all immigration officers managing Baitul Mahabbah centres nationwide.

SUKA Society continued advocacy to advance the release of children from immigration detention into community-based ATD. We engaged extensively with government stakeholders, participating in 11 meetings to develop a proposed ATD Pilot for unaccompanied children in collaboration with key ministries, agencies, and partners, and contributed to the development of draft SOPs and technical preparations to support future implementation.



A group photo with the participants of the Regional Peer-Learning Platform on Alternative Care Arrangements for Children in the Context of International Migration in the Asia Pacific in Sydney, Australia.

Executive Summary (cont'd)

We also participated in regional and national platforms, including the Asia Pacific Regional Peer-Learning Platform forum convened by the International Detention Coalition and Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration, contributed to initiatives on protection safeguards and pre-deportation screening, and coordinated closely with UN agencies and civil society partners. As an active member of the End Detention Network, we engaged in joint advocacy, public engagement planning, and collective statements to promote community-based ATD and strengthen positive narratives on refugee protection in Malaysia.



SUKA Society's representative (left) speaking during a panel discussion at the ATD Symposium held on 20th – 21st August at Hotel Dorsett Putrajaya.

This year, SUKA Society embarked on a new journey to advance development of community-based ATD in Sabah, where large undocumented and stateless populations face heightened risk of immigration detention and where ATD remains underexplored. A research project was conducted to examine the protection landscape, existing service structures, and the readiness of government agencies, NGOs, and affected communities to support ATD implementation in Sabah. Data collection and analysis were completed, with the report scheduled for release in Q2 2026. Through the research process, we identified capacity building needs and organised two child protection workshops in Kota Kinabalu and Semporna, reaching 38 NGO representatives.

In 2026, SUKA Society will continue to advocate and engage the government on the implementation of an ATD Pilot for unaccompanied children to be released from detention into community-based ATD. We aim to strengthen child protection practices in Baitul Mahabbah Nilai by providing follow up child protection training to immigration officers. Finally, we will finalise the Sabah research report and develop a strategy to work towards building foundations of ATD in Sabah, while supporting NGOs in Sabah with child protection capacity building workshops.

Programme Overview

Background

There is increasing global consensus that immigration detention of children is a violation of child rights and is never in the best interest of the child. Malaysian immigration laws make no distinction between adults and minors (persons below 18 years old). As such, children who violate immigration laws are subjected to the same arrest and detention conditions as adults. Children detained for immigration related offences include refugee and asylum-seekers, migrants, stateless and other undocumented children. Refugee and asylum-seeking children are at higher risk of prolonged detention, as they cannot be repatriated. Adults and children are held in the same facilities with no specialised care and policies for children. Conditions in immigration detention centres are harsh, with poor nutrition, healthcare, hygiene and sanitation and there is risk of violence and abuse.



Unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) who are undocumented or have irregular migration status are particularly vulnerable to immigration detention. Without structured assistance that prioritises their best interest in the migration process, UASC are more vulnerable to prolonged detention, abuse and exploitation.

Harsh conditions in immigration detention have a significant impact on the developmental and psychological wellbeing of children. Children in immigration detention, even for a short period, face significant physical and mental health issues, including developmental delays, malnutrition, inability to sleep, and overall poor health. Children faced with prolonged detention may suffer from serious medical conditions, chronic stress, other psychiatric and anxiety-related conditions, are unable to develop holistically in a supportive environment, and lack positive coping mechanisms. Children, especially boys held in the male facility, are also at risk for violence, trauma and abuse.



As of 6th July 2025, 17,896 detainees were placed in immigration detention centres throughout Malaysia. 10.4% of detainees are children below the age of 18.¹



In 2024, 3,766 children were detained in immigration detention centres, 2,095 of whom were unaccompanied children below the age of 18. Comparatively, only 223 children were detained in Baitul Mahabbah centres in the same period.²



Death in Malaysian detention centres are common. Between 1st January and 18th June 2024, there were 20 reported deaths.³ In 2023, there were 41 deaths, two of which were children.⁴

¹ Parlimen Malaysia (2025) [Jawapan Lisan Dewan Rakyat](#)

² Committee on the Rights of the Child (2026) [Malaysia report - Annex to Reply to List of Issues](#)

³ The Star (2024) [All deaths in Immigration, police custody this year due to illness, says Home Ministry](#)

⁴ Parlimen Malaysia (2024) [Jawapan Lisan Dewan Rakyat](#)

The Alternative To Detention (ATD) Programme

Since 2013, SUKA Society has been advocating for ATD to be implemented in Malaysia with the goal of ending the practice of immigration detention for children. In order to achieve our goal, we conduct the following activities:

What is Alternative To Detention (ATD)?

ATD is any legislation, policy or practice, formal or informal, that ensures people are not detained for reasons relating to their migration status. ATD allows for individuals at risk of immigration detention to live in non-custodial, community-based settings while their immigration status is being resolved.

The most effective alternatives involve case management provided by a range of actors – social workers, civil society and/or specialised staff from immigration authorities. ATD are more cost-effective compared to immigration detention and it is an effective migration management tool which ensures the rights of children and their families are respected.



- Advocate for the release of UASC from immigration detention centres into community-based care.
- Promote implementation of an ATD Model designed for UASC presently held in immigration detention centres.
- Direct engagement with key stakeholders such as government agencies and policymakers on the development and implementation of ATD in Malaysia.
- Coordinate and collaborate with United Nations (UN) agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM), and refugee communities.
- Capacity building on child protection for immigration officers and other stakeholders working with children affected by immigration detention.



SUKA Society has been working with the Ministry of Home Affairs (KDN), Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development (KPWKM), Social Welfare Department (JKM), and the Immigration Department (JIM) to develop and implement ATD for unaccompanied and separated children in immigration detention centres.

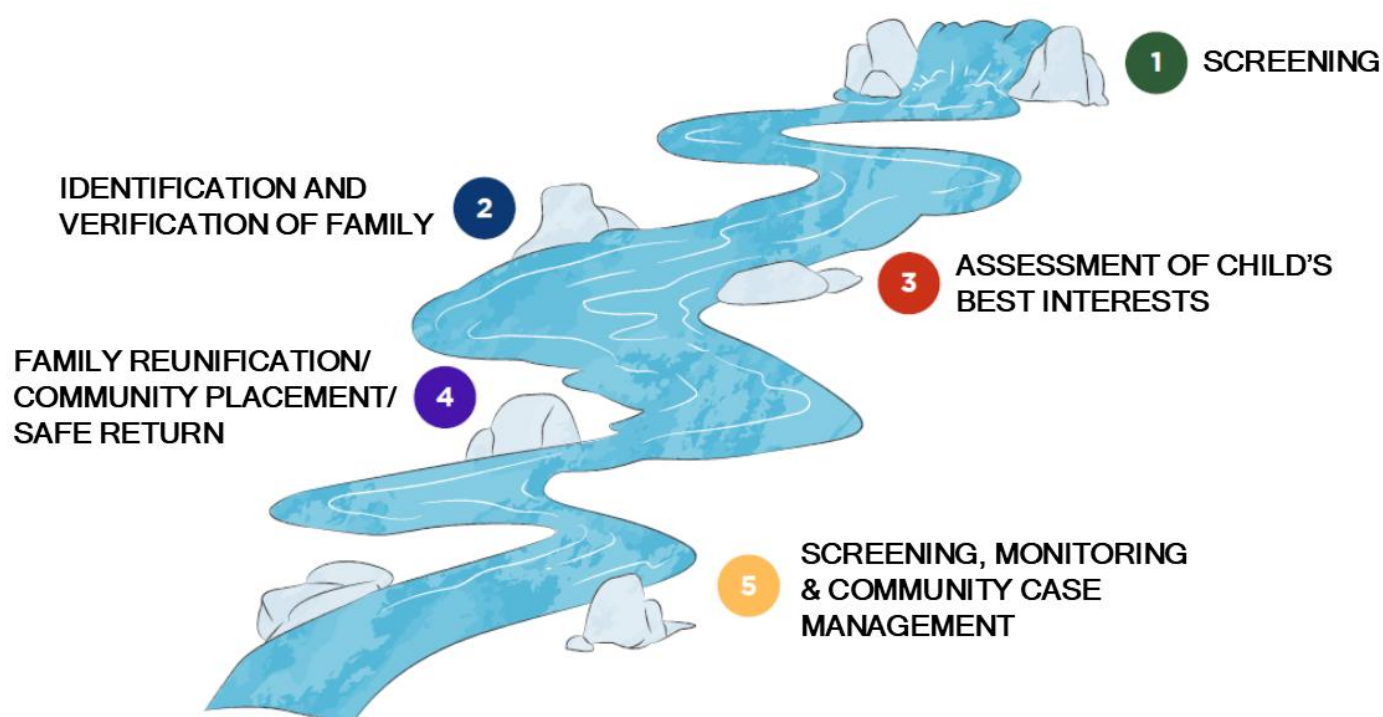
The ATD model promoted by SUKA Society involves vulnerability screening and assessment, release from immigration detention centres into community placement with relatives or foster caregivers, case management, and identification and implementation of a long-term resolution plan.

In 2021, an ATD Pilot Project was approved by the Ministerial Cabinet, to be implemented by KDN, KPWKM, JKM, JIM and two partner NGOs, SUKA Society and Yayasan Chow Kit. Due to certain restrictions imposed by the Ministerial Cabinet, the ATD Pilot Project faced severe delays and ultimately was not implemented.

In 2023, KDN established Baitul Mahabbah, which are centres for children aged 10 and below and their mothers who were detained at immigration detention centres. These centres were promoted as transit centres where children are held pending deportation. Although these centres aim to provide a better environment for detained children, they are still detention centres and not a form of ATD and many other children remain detained in immigration detention centres.

SUKA Society continues its work in advocating for the protection of children at risk of immigration detention, release of children from immigration detention centres, and the development and implementation of rights-based ATD.

PROCESS OF ATD



Proposed process for an ATD model in Malaysia presented during a multistakeholder workshop on ATD organised by KDN in Feb 2025

Advocacy

SUKA Society advocates with key stakeholders to achieve our goal of the release of children from immigration detention into community-based ATD. We engage government ministries and agencies, parliamentarians, UN bodies, NGOs, community organisations, and the diplomatic community to raise awareness, propose solutions, and build support. Our advocacy is carried out through direct government engagement and in collaboration with other civil society organisations.

In 2025, SUKA Society continued direct engagement with the government and attended 11 meetings with various government agencies and ministries to follow up from efforts in 2024 to develop a new ATD initiative for unaccompanied children in immigration detention centres. Discussions centred around the plan to implement an ATD Pilot for unaccompanied children with collaboration between JIM, JKM, SUKA Society and YCK. The ATD Pilot was initially planned to be implemented by the fourth quarter alongside the government's plan to register asylum seekers in detention centres under the Dokumen Pendaftaran Pelarian (DPP). However, agreement on the implementation of ATD Pilot has yet to be reached and discussions would continue in 2026.

Key Highlights in Government Engagements:

February

Presented a proposal for an ATD Pilot during a multistakeholder ATD Workshop organised by KDN. The proposal outlined processes for a community-based ATD to be implemented in collaboration between JIM, JKM and NGOs.



August

A Symposium on Alternative to Detention for Unaccompanied and Separated Refugee Children in Malaysia was organised by the Institut Kajian Etnik (KITA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and KDN, and supported by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Yayasan Chow Kit, SUKA Society and Malaysian Humanitarian Aid and Relief (MAHAR). SUKA Society presented on our CPCM programme as an ATD model. This event marks the first public event organised by the government to discuss ATD in Malaysia for refugee children.

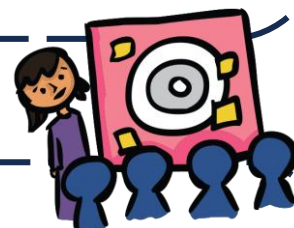
May

Attended a follow up workshop organised by KDN where Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for an ATD programme were jointly developed with representatives from KPWKM, MKN, JKM, JIM, International Detention Coalition (IDC), YCK, and UNICEF. SUKA Society also presented about our Community Placement and Case Management (CPCM) programme to provide participants with a better understanding of a community-based ATD model.



August-October

As preparation for implementation of ATD and to assist the government in their implementation of DPP registration, SUKA Society organised briefings for experienced refugee interpreters and identified interpreters who agreed to be engaged by SUKA Society or the government for a future ATD and DPP programme.



Advocacy (Cont.)

Aside from government engagement, we participated in various meetings and initiatives focused on ATD and broader refugee protection with other stakeholders. Key highlights:

- Participated in the Regional Peer-Learning Platform on Alternative Care Arrangements for Children in the Context of International Migration in the Asia Pacific in Sydney, Australia from 18th to 20th February. Organized as an annual event by the Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM) and the International Detention Coalition (IDC), the Regional Platform is space to learn best practices from other countries and engage the Malaysian government representatives on way forward in implementing ATD in Malaysia while highlighting the importance of the whole-of-society approach.
- Contributed to efforts led by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) to develop ATD processes for the medically vulnerable in detention, including attending a Roundtable on the Medically Vulnerable in Detention on 18th February and follow up discussions.
- Contributed to an initiative by YB Wong Chen, Chair of the Parliamentary Special Select Committee (PSSC) on International Relations and International Trade on development of a proposed process for pre-deportation screening to ensure that asylum seekers are not summarily deported without assessment. The proposal was presented by YB Wong Chen to KDN for consideration.



SUKA presenting an ATD Pilot proposal during a multistakeholder workshop on ATD organised by KDN in February 2025.

SUKA Society attended three coordination meetings on ATD advocacy alongside UN agencies such as UNICEF, UNHCR, and IOM, as well as key NGOs including IDC and YCK. These meetings served as valuable platforms for sharing information, strategizing, and fostering collaboration on ATD-related initiatives.

SUKA Society is a member of the End Detention Network (EDN), a coalition of 22 civil society organizations and individuals striving to eliminate immigration detention for children in Malaysia. Through this network, we engage in joint advocacy efforts and strategic initiatives with fellow NGOs. In 2025, EDN convened four times to share updates on detention and refugee policies, identify advocacy opportunities and strategies, and plan joint activities. In July, EDN members met for a public engagement workshop to develop plans for a public engagement campaign to promote positive narratives of refugees. The EDN also published a press statement in conjunction with the second anniversary of establishment of Baitul Mahabbah to call on the government to implement community-based ATD.⁵

⁵ End Detention Network (2025) [Two years of Baitul Mahabbah, children still detained: EDN calls for real alternatives](#)

Facilitation of Activities for Children in Detention

SUKA Society continued to provide services to children and mothers in Baitul Mahabbah Nilai and monitor the treatment and condition of the detainees. But Yayasan Chow Kit and Humankind made the decision to withdraw their services in Baitul Mahabbah Nilai. This decision was made due to lack of progress in the exit policy for the asylum-seeking children and access for interpreters to facilitate activities with NGOs.

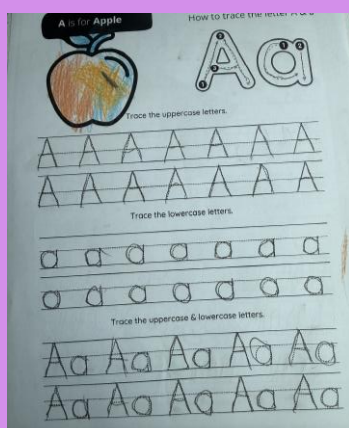
Throughout 2025, a **total of 81 activities** were conducted for the children and mothers.

Type of activity	No. of Sessions
Children – Basic literacy and education	71
Mothers – Psychosocial	8
Special events	2
Total	81

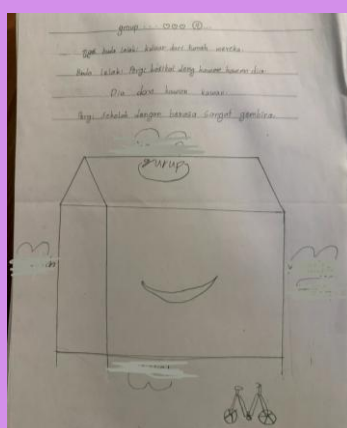


SUKA Society focused on providing basic literacy and education to children aged three and above. As the majority of children did not have prior access to education, most of the activities were focused on the basics, such as learning alphabets, numbers as well as how to read and write in Malay and English. We also covered other skills such as conversing, understanding emotions and role playing. All the children have progressed in their learning. The younger children who are below five have shown improvement in their alphabet and numeracy skills, and the older children have improved in their English language skills as well as gained confidence during the sessions.

After Humankind stopped facilitating activities for the mothers, SUKA Society was concerned about the impact on the mothers' well-being. In response to the gap, we started conducting psychosocial activities for the mothers in Baitul Mahabbah Nilai on a monthly basis, starting in March. Activities such as process painting, meditation and mindfulness practices were conducted to facilitate the mothers in expressing their feelings and learning tools to manage emotions in a healthy manner. As the sessions progressed, the mothers began to open up, despite the challenges faced during prolonged detention.



A child, aged 5 and below, practicing writing their letters.



A story written in Bahasa Melayu by a group of older kids as part of a group activity in class.



A painting done by a mother during the mothers' session to help her process her emotions.

HIGHLIGHTS

Facilitation of Activities for Children in Detention

We organised two special events with the assistance from other SUKA Society staff members.



Craft made by the mothers and the children during the Hari Raya celebration.

Hari Raya Celebration

On 9th April, we held a Hari Raya celebration for the children and mothers. It was an exciting time as we conducted craft activities. The mothers tried their hand at weaving and the children coloured Hari Raya lanterns. We also provided food and gifted goodie bags, with sponsorship from FBS.

World Children's Day Celebration

On 20th November, in conjunction with World Children's Day, we organised a variety of games for the children. They enjoyed the activities and enthusiastically participated in all the games. We also gave out goodie bags for the celebration, delighting the children.



SUKA staff preparing the goodie bags with snacks for the children.

SUKA Society facilitated the connection between JIM and two NGOs, HOST International and Advocates for Non-discrimination and Access to Knowledge (ANAK), to conduct activities for children at Baitul Mahabbah in Kedah and Papar, Sabah. HOST International started organising activities in Baitul Mahabbah Kedah in April while ANAK commenced their services in October. We also connected Cahaya Suria Bakti with JIM to explore the provision of services in Johor; however, this collaboration is currently pending approval.

In 2026, SUKA will continue with facilitating activities for the children and mothers in Baitul Mahabbah Nilai while monitoring the conditions and treatment in the detention centre. We will also continue advocating for the release of the children into community-based care.

Building Foundations for ATD in Sabah



Development and advocacy for ATD in Malaysia has mainly been explored in the migration and socio-political context of Peninsular Malaysia. Sabah hosts large populations of undocumented and stateless persons, who are also at risk of immigration detention. The context in Sabah for children affected by immigration detention presents unique challenges and development of ATD in the Sabah context is limited and underexplored. As the Malaysian Government shows increasing interest in exploring and implementing an ATD programme as part of its immigration detention policy, SUKA Society believes there is a need to assess the viability of developing a community-based ATD model tailored to the Sabah context.

In 2025, we conducted a research project, *Building Foundations for Community-Based Alternatives to Detention for Children Affected by Immigration Detention in Sabah: Needs and Capacity Assessment*. This research seeks to identify foundational elements necessary for an ATD model, including understanding the current protection landscape, existing child protection and service provision structures and the capacity of local government agencies, NGOs and migrant and stateless communities.

By conducting this research, SUKA Society aims to develop evidence-based recommendations for building foundations required for implementing a community-based ATD framework in Sabah. This will help inform capacity-building efforts, program development, and policy advocacy, ensuring the rights and protection of children at risk of immigration detention in Sabah.



Field visit to a village at Kota Kinabalu to conduct research interviews.



A family from Omdal Island carrying out their daily activities on the sea.

Building Foundations for ATD in Sabah

As of the end of 2025, the data collection and analysis have been completed and drafting of the report is underway. It is estimated that the report will be finalised and released in the second quarter of 2026.

As part of the research process, we identified child protection capacity building needs of some of the NGOs in Sabah. On 16th -17th June, we conducted a workshop in Kota Kinabalu on Child Protection for Undocumented and Stateless Children, attended by 17 representatives from NGOs based in Kota Kinabalu and Sandakan.

The workshop began with a data validation session on preliminary research findings, where participants provided feedback on the preliminary research findings. We also held sessions on children protection and safeguarding, challenges of reporting child protection incidents, basics of case management procedures and mapping of services for undocumented and stateless children in Sabah. Participants were highly engaged in discussions and described the training as timely and relevant, expressing interest in further capacity building sessions on case management and development of child protection policies.



Session on Case Management Processes at the Child Protection Workshop at Kota Kinabalu.

On 13th November, a second workshop was conducted in Semporna for 21 participants from NGOs based in Semporna and Tawau. Although the workshop covered similar topics as the previous workshop in Kota Kinabalu, we found that participants needed a different approach to capacity building which was less theoretical and more practical application of child protection and safeguarding. Participants expressed interest in further capacity building sessions on child protection.

In 2026, SUKA Society plans to continue engagement with NGOs on the findings of the research to develop a strategy on building foundations of ATD in Sabah. We also plan to follow up with more capacity building workshops on child protection, to build on the interest of participants and lessons learnt from the workshops in 2025.

Training for Immigration Officers

From 2023-2024, SUKA Society conducted 5 child sensitisation training workshops titled “Kursus Pengendalian dan Penjagaan Kanak-Kanak” for JIM officers in Baitul Mahabbah Nilai, Papar, Bekenu, Kedah dan Tanah Merah. In 2025, a workshop was conducted for 16 immigration officers in Baitul Mahabbah Johor on 16 and 17 April. This marks the final workshop to end this series of training for all Baitul Mahabbah centres.



SUKA Society trainer facilitating the workshop session at Baitul Mahabbah Johor on 16th April.

The workshop's contents were focused on the application of child protection principles in the daily management of Baitul Mahabbah. We sought to understand the perspectives of the officers and shift their mindset towards a more child protection approach. Shifting mindsets was important as JIM officers are trained in enforcement, viewing detainees as offenders instead of individuals who come from complex situations as well as children who require protection and care.

The participants were initially hesitant to participate but with facilitation and encouragement, they gradually became more engaged. Participants shared the challenges that they faced in their new role in managing Baitul Mahabbah, but through the discussions, it was revealed that many participants were concerned for the wellbeing of the children in the detention centre.

Towards the end of the workshop, participants gained understanding on how Baitul Mahabbah is still a form of detention especially in the context of the child's development in terms of health, mental health and education. These sessions have helped to reframe the officer's mindset in terms of the management of the children and mothers in Baitul Mahabbah while acknowledging a long-term solution is required.



Participants from Baitul Mahabbah Johor participating in a discussion at the child sensitisation workshop on 17 April.



Participants from Baitul Mahabbah Johor Child Sensitisation Workshop taking a group photo with SUKA Society trainers.

In 2026, SUKA Society is planning to conduct a follow up workshop for JIM officers in Baitul Mahabbah Nilai to further improve knowledge and practices in child protection and management.

Programme Expenses for 2025

Alternative to Detention

No.	Details	Total (MYR)
01.	Programme Manpower Overhead and Casual Wages (Programme Coordinator, Programme Facilitator, Researcher, Consultant)	220,627.60
02.	Travel	13,029.64
03.	Venue	3,700.00
04.	Food	3,275.93
05.	Education Programme	597.31
06.	Sabah Needs Assessment Study	157.66
07.	Printing & Stationery	48.45
Total Yearly Programme Cost		241,436.59



How You Can Help

The ATD team is looking for long-term volunteers to assist in conducting basic literacy and educational programmes for children affected by immigration detention. Volunteers must be based in or willing to travel to Nilai, enjoy working with children, available on weekday mornings/afternoon and committed to volunteer weekly or fortnightly for a minimum of 3 months.

Acknowledgements

SUKA Society would like to acknowledge and thank our partners such as FBS, the International Detention Coalition (IDC), Yayasan Chow Kit, members of the End Detention Network (EDN), UNICEF, UNHCR, our funders, volunteers, and key partners from the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development of Malaysia for the close collaboration and support in advancing the rights of children affected by immigration detention.

Contact Details

For more information regarding the ATD programme, please get in touch with us at enquiry@sukasociety.org.

📍 SUKA Society
P.O. Box 013 Jalan Sultan,
46700 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia

☎ Contact No: 03-7877 4227

🌐 Website: sukasociety.org

📷 Instagram: @sukasociety

📘 Facebook: SUKA Society

