

Non-State Humanitarian Activism and Migrant Workers in Malaysia: Idea Construction and Actions

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Abstract

Empirical research indicates the existence of a phenomenon within Indonesian humanitarian activism. Here, Indonesian migrant workers are seen to voluntarily help fellow countrymen facing difficulties, on both case-by-case and ongoing basis. Equally vital, they exhibit close and constructive relations with key members of local society, including police and community leaders. Their good deeds in this humanitarian context contribute to trust and confidence-building with the locals. Subsequent to these observations, this research questions are what drives these folks' actions, and what sort of collaborative projects have come as a result. Additionally, it asks how this phenomenon fits into or contributes to literature and the theory of international relations. Using qualitative approach enriched by field interviews, this article argues that through dead body management, Indonesian migrant workers' presence can contribute positively to humanity; particularly, for the community, when state actors have limitations. Religious and social motivations combine to form potent forces that can support migrant workers to provide a helping hand to those in need. Their good deeds can also offer a fresh perspective on humanitarian activism, which up until now has been dominated by conflict narratives. It is exactly this fresh perspective to which this paper makes an important contribution: by focusing on migrant workers, humanity, and peace.

Keywords: *humanitarian, activism, migrant workers, Indonesia, Malaysia*

I. INTRODUCTION

Numerous contemporary trans-border activities raise a number of important conceptual issues for the study of “migrant workers”, such as: migrant workers' survival,¹

1 Ali Maksum & Surwandono, “Suffer to Survive: The Indonesian Illegal Workers Experiences in Malaysia and Japan” (2017) 8:1 J Soc Res Policy 101–123.

remittances,² labour shortages and cheap migrant workers,³ human trafficking,⁴ border measures,⁵ clandestine channels,⁶ securitization,⁷ and identity cohesion with the locals.⁸ In line with this, existing studies on migrant workers are often framed from security narratives. Migrant related security issues emerged following the 11 September 2001 attacks, which led to the total re-evaluation of the threats to national security posed by foreigners.⁹ According to Gregory W. White,¹⁰ the so called “security mentality” forced state authorities to respond to migrant workers through a negative lens. As a consequence, the rise of global migration (notably from countries in the Middle East) has included the negative association of migrants to the rise of crime, drug trafficking, and terrorism.¹¹ The negative views against migrants, whether refugees or asylum seekers, as well as regular and irregular labour, were exaggerated by “the politics of othering” – resulting in widespread insecurity.¹² As a result, policy outcomes are heavily influenced

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- 2 Amr Hosny, “Remittance Concentration and Volatility: Evidence from 72 Developing Countries” (2020) 34:4 *Int Econ J* 553–570, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10168737.2020.1824008>>; Robyn M Rodriguez, “Migrant Heroes: Nationalism, Citizenship and the Politics of Filipino Migrant Labor” (2002) 6:3 *Citizensh Stud* 341–356, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1362102022000011658>>.
 - 3 Marion Joppe, “Migrant workers: Challenges and opportunities in addressing tourism labour shortages” (2012) 33:3 *Tour Manag* 662–671, online: <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0261517711001518>>; Martin Ruhs & Bridget Anderson, *Who Needs Migrant Workers?: Labour shortages, immigration, and public policy*, by Ruhs Martin & Anderson Bridget (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
 - 4 Amarjit Kaur, “Labour migration trends and policy challenges in Southeast Asia” (2010) 29:4 *Policy Soc* 385–397, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2010.09.001>>.
 - 5 Joseph Trawicki Anderson, “Managing labour migration in Malaysia: foreign workers and the challenges of ‘control’ beyond liberal democracies” (2021) 42:1 *Third World Q* 86–104, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1784003>>.
 - 6 Andrew M Carruthers, “Policing Intensity” (2019) 31:3 *Public Cult* 469–496, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-7532715>>; Andrew M Carruthers, ““Their Accent Would Betray Them”: Clandestine Movement and the Sound of “Illegality” in Malaysia’s Borderlands” (2017) 32:2 *Sojourn J Soc Issues Southeast Asia* 221–259, online: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44668416>>.
 - 7 Jef Huysmans, “The European Union and the Securitization of Migration” (2000) 38:5 *J Common Mark Stud* 751–777.
 - 8 David McCollum, “Migration and Social Cohesion in the UK” (2013) 14:8 *Soc Cult Geogr* 982–983, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2013.797187>>; Davide Però, “Migrants, Cohesion and the Cultural Politics of the State: Critical Perspectives on the Management of Diversity” (2013) 39:8 *J Ethn Migr Stud* 1241–1259, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.787511>>.
 - 9 Michael Humphrey, “Migration, Security and Insecurity” (2013) 34:2 *J Intercult Stud* 178–195, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2013.781982>>.
 - 10 Gregory W White, “Sovereignty and international labor migration: The ‘security mentality’ in Spanish–Moroccan relations as an assertion of sovereignty” (2007) 14:4 *Rev Int Polit Econ* 690–718, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290701475411>>.
 - 11 Roxanne Doty, *Anti-immigrantism in western democracies: Statecraft, desire, and the politics of exclusion* (London: Routledge, 2006); Petter Gottschalk & Gabriel Greenberg, *Islamophobia: Making Muslims the Enemy* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).
 - 12 Rita Himmel & Maria Manuel Baptista, ““Migrants, refugees and othering: constructing europeaness. An exploration of Portuguese and German media” (2020) 38 *Comun e Soc* 179–200; Humphrey, *supra* note 9; Michał Krzyżanowski, Anna Triandafyllidou & Ruth Wodak, “The Mediatization and

by the perception that migrant workers are a real threat to national sovereignty and societal security. Securitization predominantly became a common discourse that constructs migrants as people who would endanger the country's stability: as seen in European countries,¹³ North America,¹⁴ Australia,¹⁵ and Malaysia.¹⁶ Nonetheless, despite these perceived disadvantages, migrant workers have still been able to maintain their ties to their home country.¹⁷

Scholars of migration have reported varied findings about political issues surrounding migrant workers and their strong ties to their home countries. Migrants, for example, contributed financially to their home country's political affairs, served as peacemakers, and even exported "violence" to host countries.¹⁸ Meanwhile, some researchers discovered that migrant communities were involved in forming organizations

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- the Politicization of the "Refugee Crisis" in Europe" (2018) 16:1-2 *J Immigr Refug Stud* 1-14, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2017.1353189>>.
- 13 Valeria Bello, "The spiralling of the securitisation of migration in the EU: from the management of a 'crisis' to a governance of human mobility?" (2020) *J Ethn Migr Stud* 1-18, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1851464>>; Huysmans, *supra* note 7.
- 14 Idil Atak, Graham Hudson & Delphine Nakache, "The Securitisation of Canada's Refugee System: Reviewing the Unintended Consequences of the 2012 Reform" (2018) 37:1 *Refug Surv Q* 1-24, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdx019>>; Desirée Colomé-Menéndez, Joachim A Koops & Daan Weggemans, "A country of immigrants no more? The securitization of immigration in the National Security Strategies of the United States of America" (2021) 7:1 *Glob Aff* 1-26, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2021.1888652>>; Anthony M Messina, "Securitizing Immigration in the Age of Terror" (2014) 66:3 *World Polit* 530-559, online: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24577527>>.
- 15 Anthony Burke, *Fear of Security: Australia's Invasion Anxiety* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Binoy Kampmark, "Securitization, Refugees, and Australia's Turn Back the Boats Policy, 2013-2015" (2017) 31:1 *Antipodes* 61-75, online: <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13110/antipodes.31.1.0061>>.
- 16 A R Arifianto, "The Securitization of Transnational Labor Migration: The Case of Malaysia and Indonesia" (2009) 1 *Asian Polit Policy* 613-630; R Dollah & K Abdullah, "The Securitization of Migrant Workers in Sabah, Malaysia" (2018) 19:3 *J Int Migr Integr* 717-735; Sasagu Kudo, "Securitization of Undocumented Migrants and the Politics of Insecurity in Malaysia" (2013) 17 *3rd Int Conf Sustain Futur Hum Secur Sustain* 2012, 3-5 Novemb 2012, Clock Tower Centen Hall, Kyoto Univ JAPAN 947-956, online: <<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1878029613001151>>.
- 17 Fiona B Adamson, "Constructing the Diaspora: Diaspora Identity Politics and Transnational Social Movements" in T Lyons & P Mandaville, eds, *Polit from Afar Transnatl Diasporas Networks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012) 25.
- 18 Fiona B Adamson, "Sending States and the Making of Intra-Diasporic Politics: Turkey and Its Diaspora(s)" (2019) 53:1 *Int Migr Rev* 210-236, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918318767665>>; Fiona B Adamson, "Non-state authoritarianism and diaspora politics" (2020) 20:1 *Glob Networks* 150-169, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12246>>; Bahar Baser & Ashok Swain, "Diasporas as Peacemakers: Third Party Mediation in Homeland Conflicts" (2008) 25:3 *Int J World Peace* 7-28, online: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20752844>>.

that combat homesickness,¹⁹ charitable activities,²⁰ and most importantly contributing mutual aid in the host country in terms of job information sharing and the likes.²¹ However, few scholars, have looked into migrant workers' contributions to humanitarian actions such as transporting dead bodies, rescuing abandoned sick migrant workers, providing vocational education, and even assisting for undocumented migrants. Indeed, non-state humanitarian organizations play a critical role when the state is limited in its ability to manage its large number of migrant worker cases. The offer of this support and associated activities is often motivated by religious drivers²² or internal consciousness among migrant workers. However, undertaking humanitarian action can place extra burdens on migrant workers, who are traditionally in a poor position due to a lack of human and capital resources.²³ Thus, the personnel and diplomats of consulates and embassies are arguably in a better position to carry out these humanitarian activities. Humanitarian activity is therefore unusual among migrant workers, who are generally focused on their own needs and personal matters (rather than humanitarian issues).²⁴ This focus may exist with a lack of awareness that humanitarian activism has the potential to change the unfavourable image of migrant workers, which is especially prevalent in host countries. A positive image of migrant workers can strengthen local cohesion and, as a result, bilateral relations between countries which send and receive labourers.

By focusing on migrant workers' humanitarian activism, perspectives of migrant workers may be broadened beyond the negative coverage they often receive. Their lives may be understood in totality; minimizing the neglect toward their humanity, and their conscience to do good deeds for others. This study attempts to establish a conceptual

19 Mohammad Morad & Francesco Della Puppa, "Bangladeshi migrant associations in Italy: transnational engagement, community formation and regional unity" (2019) 42:10 *Ethn Racial Stud* 1788-1807, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1515441>>.

20 Hilman Latief, "Addressing Unfortunate Wayfarer: Islamic Philanthropy and Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong" (2017) 10:2 *Austrian J South-East Asian Stud* 237-255, online: <<https://aseas.univie.ac.at/index.php/aseas/article/view/2675>>; Galia Sabar, Deby Babis & Naama Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, "From Fragility to Empowerment through Philanthropy: The Filipino Labor Migrant Community in Israel During COVID-19" (2021) *J Immigr Refug Stud* 1-16, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2021.1898074>>.

21 Diego Avalos, "Mutual Aid Networks: Informal Shop Floor Organizing among Mexican Migrant Construction Workers in San Diego" (2019) 5 *Socius* 2378023119828549, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023119828549>>.

22 Ashlan Tezel McCarthy, "Non-state actors and education as a humanitarian response: role of faith-based organizations in education for Syrian refugees in Turkey" (2017) 2:1 *J Int Humanit Action* 13, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-017-0028-x>>.

23 Bridget Anderson, Upasana Khadka & Martin Ruhs, "Demand for migrant workers: institutional system effects beyond national borders" (2024) 50:5 *J Ethn Migr Stud* 1202-1225, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2279741>>.

24 Mònica Guillen-Royo, "Applying the fundamental human needs approach to sustainable consumption corridors: participatory workshops involving information and communication technologies" (2020) 16:1 *Sustain Sci Pract Policy* 114-127, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2020.1787311>>; Bjarke Refslund & Markku Sippola, "Migrant workers trapped between individualism and collectivism: The formation of union-based workplace collectivism" (2020) 43:3 *Econ Ind Democr* 1004-1027, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0143831X20967412>>.

bridge between mainstream non-state humanitarian activism and migrant workers' self-organization. The case of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia is useful in understanding non-state humanitarian activism, which is typically carried out by formal non-state entities. This research questions what drives these migrant workers' actions, what resulting collaborative projects have emerged, and how such non-state humanitarian activism can be understood and explained.

This article argues that migrant workers do not constantly cause negative impacts. In fact, their presence can contribute positively to humanity – particularly for the community, when state actors have limitations. Their good deeds can also offer a fresh perspective on humanitarian activism, which until now has been dominated by conflict narratives. It is exactly these fresh perspectives which this study contributes to by focusing on migrant workers, humanity, and peace. The paper is structured by first exploring migrant workers' humanitarian activism, then explaining the methodological approach used to collecting relevant data. This is followed by a discussion of the implementation of Indonesian migrant workers' humanitarian activism, specifically in Malaysia. The article concludes with recommendations for future research and policy.

II. THEORISING MIGRANT WORKERS' HUMANITARIAN ACTIVISM²⁵

In this section, concepts related to the theme of this study will be reviewed, namely: humanitarian action, migrant workers and activism, and migrant workers humanitarian activism. This review expects to contribute to the final conception development of migrant workers' humanitarian activism in international relations (IR) theory, as well as fill gaps in prior research.

25 The discussion regarding developing the theory of migrant workers' humanitarian activism cannot be separated from three distinct terms: immigrants, diaspora, and migrant workers. It is essential to recognise that these terms encompass overlapping but distinct categories within the migrant population. While migrant workers primarily move for employment purposes, some may also be positioned as immigrants, indicating a desire for permanent settlement, or as part of a diaspora, maintaining strong ties to their country of origin while residing abroad. Therefore, understanding the nuances and intersections of these terms is crucial for comprehensively analysing the dynamics of humanitarian activism within migrant communities. Please see Judith T Shuval, "Diaspora Migration: Definitional Ambiguities and a Theoretical Paradigm" (2000) 38:5 *Int Migr* 41–56, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2435.00127>>; Yevgeny Kuznetsov, *Diaspora networks and the international migration of skills: How countries can draw on their talent abroad* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2006).

1. Humanitarian action: State versus non-state actors

Humanitarian aid is generally defined as a moral duty and a basic embodiment of the universal ideal of human solidarity. Specifically, European Universities on Professionalization on Humanitarian Action (EUPRHA) describe humanitarian assistance as:

“to provide a needs-based emergency response aimed at preserving life, preventing and alleviating human suffering and maintaining human dignity wherever the need arises if governments and local actors are overwhelmed, unable or unwilling to act.”²⁶

Among Indonesian Muslims, humanitarian aid has traditionally been provided through the philanthropic concept of *zakat* (almsgiving or mandatory giving) in the context of Islamic studies. The *zakat* requires Muslims to set aside between at least 2.5 % to 10 % of their earnings to be allocated to the poor and needy.²⁷ Meanwhile, the Muslim aid organization is a non-profit dedicated to providing assistance. Professional aid organizations, as well as private volunteer organizations and non-governmental organizations, exist both within the government and between governments as multilateral donors. The UN Charter explicitly states that as an international organization, the UN has a responsibility “to achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character.”²⁸

The study of humanitarian action and migration is substantial in the field of IR. However, humanitarian actions tend to be linked to power and crisis contexts, following the growth of conflicts and humanitarian catastrophes in regions.²⁹ According to Lafrenière,³⁰ it is essential for humanitarian efforts to actively include the participation of women and local communities to ensure that interventions are effective and equitable. This inclusion not only aligns with global humanitarian principles but also enhances the responsiveness and sustainability of humanitarian actions. In this circumstance, the state is positioned as the main actor who predominantly controls the range of humanitarian actions. Even with prominent mobilizing non-state players like Oxfam, Save the Children, World Vision International, and others, the state's role remains large and is especially influenced by the major powers. Within the discursive realm of humanitarian

26 *The State of Art of Humanitarian Action*, by EUPRHA (Bilbao, Spain, 2013) online: <<https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/EUPRHA-Report.-The-State-of-Art-of-Humanitarian-Action-2013.pdf>>.

27 Latief, *supra* note 20.

28 United Nations, “Deliver Humanitarian Aid” (2021), online: <<https://www.un.org/en/our-work/deliver-humanitarian-aid>>.

29 Anna Khakee, “Humanitarian Action in International Relations: Power and Politics” in Hans-Joachim Heintze & Pierre Thielbörger, eds, *Int Humanit Action NOHA Textb* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018) 19.

30 J Lafrenière, C Sweetman & T Thylin, “Introduction: gender, humanitarian action and crisis response” (2019) 27:2 *Gend Dev* 187-201, online: <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13552074.2019.1634332>> Cited By (since 2019): 32.

action, there exists a notable domination of Western countries.³¹ On one hand, the humanitarian response in IR had been largely shaped by the narrative of crisis, conflict, and the state's engagement. On the other hand, researchers seldom address humanitarian action in a tranquil environment. Several academics have emphasized the critical role of non-state actors in supporting humanitarian efforts directed towards migrants.³² However, the crisis setting continues to predominate over the idea of peace.

The dominant role of state institutions is shaping the humanitarian action agenda, particularly in conflict situation, often leads academics to examine the involvement of non-state actors, including non-state armed groups (NSAGs). Naturally, this has drawn further attention to militias' participation like NSAGs in Afghanistan, Colombia, Ethiopia, Nepal, South Sudan, Vietnam, etc., which is thought to play a crucial part in the distribution of aid, and the ultimate establishment of peace.³³ As a result, components of post-conflict peace restoration increasingly emphasize the role of non-state actors in the humanitarian actions framework.³⁴ However, non-state actors are frequently portrayed to take a backseat when it comes to performing humanitarian acts in a relatively calm environment. A new perspective on non-state actors' humanitarian actions, which are frequently alienated by state actor securitization, is therefore essential. Against this background, Indonesian migrant workers should be thoroughly investigated as voluntary non-state actors who carry out humanitarian activities.

2. Migrant workers and activism

The term “activism” refers to a variety of traditionally organised actions, with the goal of gradually or radically altering society's attitudes toward specific concerns.³⁵ The methods

31 Khakee, *supra* note 29.

32 Tezel Mccarthy, *supra* note 22; Stephen P Rusczyk, “Non-state actors in the regularisation of undocumented youths: the role of the ‘education without borders network’ in Paris” (2019) 45:15 J Ethn Migr Stud 3023–3040, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1495068>>; Michelle Lokot, “The space between us: feminist values and humanitarian power dynamics in research with refugees” (2019) 27:3 Gend Dev 467–484, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2019.1664046>>.

33 Luke Moffett, “Violence and repair: The practice and challenges of non-State armed groups engaging in reparations” (2020) 102:915 Int Rev Red Cross 1057–1085, online: <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/article/violence-and-repair-the-practice-and-challenges-of-nonstate-armed-groups-engaging-in-reparations/8741A3697070A8EFAA37A27DA408DEF0>>; Claudia Hofmann & Ulrich Schneckener, “Engaging non-state armed actors in state- and peace-building: options and strategies” (2011) 93:883 Int Rev Red Cross 603–621, online: <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/article/engaging-nonstate-armed-actors-in-state-and-peacebuilding-options-and-strategies/CF8BD9D922D282660D004AA2890E3AEF>>.

34 Claudia Hofmann & Ulrich Schneckener, “How to Engage Armed Groups? Reviewing Options and Strategies for Third Parties” (2011) 29:4 Sicherheit und Frieden / Secur Peace 254–259, online: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24233364>>.

35 Forrest Briscoe & Abhinav Gupta, “Social Activism in and Around Organizations” (2016) 10:1 Acad Manag Ann 671–727, online: <<https://doi.org/10.5465/19416520.2016.1153261>>.

used to affect change range from employing printed materials like posters, pamphlets, and bulletins; to the current digital technology that offers content to incite change. Moreover, the rise of so-called “cyber-activism” has greatly influenced social activism, changing the methods of activism from “the street” to the “virtual” platform.³⁶ There also exists volunteering activism, which overlaps to a degree with traditional views of activism. However, there are differences, as volunteering activities try to separate from political struggles. Instead, volunteerism aims to express social activity objectively and independently of politics.³⁷ Due to the global connections among the organisations, this dynamic gave rise to the broader concept of activism. This became a “transnational network,” which included groups for migrant workers across the world.³⁸

In general, migrant workers’ activities are linked to economic empowerment among other employees, in addition to being a means of gathering and relieving homesickness.³⁹ These commercial endeavours are an attempt to empower oneself in the face of the difficulties arising with overseas work. Economic activities (mostly buying and selling among workers) are prevalent, as Indonesian workers in Taiwan have demonstrated.⁴⁰ To some extent, shared political emotions also drive activism among migrants. The existence of threats coming from multiple directions acts as a powerful motivator to bring people together under the same organization.⁴¹ This has inspired the rise of various overseas labour organizations, based both in home and host countries. The main concern of migrant workers’ organisations is to fight for aspirations like the rights and future of workers.⁴² The idea of sharing the same fate has also encouraged migrant

36 Jonathan A Obar, Paul Zube & Clifford Lampe, “Advocacy 2.0: An Analysis of How Advocacy Groups in the United States Perceive and Use Social Media as Tools for Facilitating Civic Engagement and Collective Action” (2012) 2 *J Inf Policy* 1–25, online: <<https://doi.org/10.5325/jinfopoli.2.2012.0001>>; Paolo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2012).

37 Lars Skov Henriksen & Lars Svedberg, “Volunteering and Social Activism: Moving beyond the Traditional Divide” (2010) 6:2 *J Civ Soc* 95–98, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2010.506365>>.

38 Alejandro Portes, Cristina Escobar & Alexandria Walton Radford, “Immigrant Transnational Organizations and Development: A Comparative Study” (2007) 41:1 *Int Migr Rev* 242–281, online: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27645659>>; Alison Salazar, *Transnational Immigrant Activism* Occidental College, (2019); Nicola Piper, “Rights of Foreign Domestic Workers – Emergence of Transnational and Transregional Solidarity?” (2005) 14:1–2 *Asian Pacific Migr J* 97–119, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/011719680501400106>>.

39 Morad & Della Puppa, *supra* note 19.

40 Rudolf Yuniarto, ““Beyond Ethnic Economy”: Religiosity, Social Entrepreneurship, and Solidarity Formation of Indonesian Migrants in Taiwan” (2021) 20:1 *Makara Hum Behav Stud Asia* 1–14.

41 Joanne M Miller & Jon A Krosnick, “Threat as a Motivator of Political Activism: A Field Experiment” (2004) 25:4 *Polit Psychol* 507–523, online: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3792406>>.

42 Nicola Piper, “Migrant Worker Activism in Singapore and Malaysia: Freedom of Association and the Role of the State” (2006) 15:3 *Asian Pacific Migr J* 359–380, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/011719680601500304>>; Ezka Amalia, “Sustaining transnational activism between Indonesia and Hong Kong” (2020) 29:1 *Asian Pacific Migr J* 12–29, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0117196820925556>>.

workers to fight for their ideals by seeking digital solidarity.⁴³ This demonstrates that migrant workers have opportunities to establish organizations, albeit depending on the host countries' regulation and level of democracy.⁴⁴

Prior research had revealed that migrant workers' activism has taken many different forms. However, migrant organizations and political activism have popularly dominated research, since embedded activism strives for policy change.⁴⁵ It is intriguing to observe the findings of Adamson⁴⁶ on immigrant political activism. Adamson asserts that migrant workers can significantly transfer political competition from their home countries to host nations through various mechanisms. This capacity is relevant to our study as it highlights the complex roles migrant workers play not only in economic terms but also in shaping socio-political dynamics in their host countries. These dynamics can influence local perceptions of migrants and, by extension, effect the efficacy and reception of humanitarian actions directed towards them. Other research also showed similar results on migrant political activism actively taking place overseas.⁴⁷ The presence of political activism naturally creates conflict among migrant workers as a result of political rivalry, for example, as occurred between the Turks-Kurds and Sinhala-Tamil Elam diaspora living in Europe.⁴⁸ Other instances of active political involvement carried out by immigrants include Jews in the Soviet Union during the Cold War,⁴⁹ Burmese people in

43 Yao-Tai Li, "Digital togetherness as everyday resistance: The use of new media in addressing work exploitation in rural areas" (2022) *New Media Soc*, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221080717>>; Sara Marino, "Making Space, Making Place: Digital Togetherness and the Redefinition of Migrant Identities Online" (2015) 1:2 *Soc Media + Soc* 2056305115622479, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115622479>>.

44 Amy Gurowitz, "Migrant Rights and Activism in Malaysia: Opportunities and Constraints" (2000) 59:4 *J Asian Stud* 863-888, online: <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/article/migrant-rights-and-activism-in-malaysia-opportunities-and-constraints/C6A862B7970B9C25FDC9AFAD1328EB95>>; *The Limits of Transnational Activism: Organizing for Migrant Worker Rights in Malaysia and Singapore*, by Lenore Lyons (Montreal, Quebec, 2006) online: <http://cccg.umontreal.ca/pdf/Lenore_Lyons_en.pdf>.

45 Timo Böhm, "Activists in Politics: The Influence of Embedded Activists on the Success of Social Movements" (2015) 62:4 *Soc Probl* 477-498, online: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44014872>>.

46 Adamson, *supra* note 18.

47 Adamson, *supra* note 18; Maria Koinova, "Autonomy and Positionality in Diaspora Politics" (2012) 6:1 *Int Polit Sociol* 99-103, online: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-5687.2011.00152_3.x>; Francesco Ragazzi, "Diaspora Politics and IR: Do We Need to Rethink the Theory?: Introduction" (2012) 6:1 *Int Polit Sociol* 95, online: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-5687.2011.00152_1.x>; Francesco Ragazzi, "Diaspora: The Politics of Its Meanings" (2012) 6:1 *Int Polit Sociol* 107-111, online: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-5687.2011.00152_5.x>; Maria Koinova & Dženeta Karabegović, "Diasporas and transitional justice: transnational activism from local to global levels of engagement" (2017) 17:2 *Glob Networks* 212-233, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12128>>.

48 Adamson, *supra* note 18.

49 Peter Hägel & Pauline Peretz, "States and Transnational Actors: Who's Influencing Whom? A Case Study in Jewish Diaspora Politics during the Cold War" (2005) 11:4 *Eur J Int Relations* 467-493, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066105057893>>.

Northern Thailand in 2016-2017,⁵⁰ Uyghur people in Germany in the post-Cold War,⁵¹ Cambodians in the United States and Canada in 1990s,⁵² Egyptians community in France and Austria during 2011-2013,⁵³ Chinese Indonesians and Indonesians in the Netherland in the post-World War II⁵⁴ and others. In this context, humanitarian activism among migrant workers differs from conventional humanitarian activism. While the outlined examples of conventional humanitarian activism led to conflicts and tensions, migrant humanitarian voluntary activities created solidarity and peace among migrant workers.

3. Migrant Workers' Humanitarian activism

From the above discussion, the concept of diaspora philanthropy is considered to be linked with the context of humanitarian activities among Indonesian migrant workers. Although philanthropy was defined broadly and from a variety of perspectives,⁵⁵ they had enough in common for their meaning to be synthesized into a larger framework.⁵⁶ Philanthropy is defined as desired actions that advance the wellbeing of others, and are typically expressed through financial or material donations. Furthermore, philanthropic missions might also involve sacrificing time for charitable work, such as social and community services, in addition to financial contributions.⁵⁷ Based on this definition, all

50 Elisabeth Olivius, "Time to go home? The conflictual politics of diaspora return in the Burmese women's movement" (2019) 20:2 Asian Ethn 148-167, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2018.1519387>>.

51 Yitzhak Shichor, "Nuisance Value: Uyghur activism in Germany and Beijing-Berlin relations" (2013) 22:82 J Contemp China 612-629, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2013.766383>>.

52 Khatharya Um, *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

53 Lea Müller-Funk, "Diaspora Mobilizations in the Egyptian (Post)Revolutionary Process: Comparing Transnational Political Participation in Paris and Vienna" (2016) 14:3 J Immigr Refug Stud 353-370, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2016.1180471>>.

54 Ibnu Nadzir, "Reclaiming Indonesian-Ness: Online and Offline Engagement of Indonesian Exiles in Netherlands" (2018) 44:1 Masy Indones 15-30, online: <<http://jmi.ipsk.lipi.go.id/index.php/jmiipks/article/view/797>>; Diego Fossati, "Embedded diasporas: ethnic prejudice, transnational networks and foreign investment" (2019) 26:1 Rev Int Polit Econ 134-157, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2018.1543721>>.

55 Although there is no consensus among scholars, philanthropy refers to the practice of individuals or organisations donating money, resources, or time to promote welfare of others and improve societal well-being. It encompasses charitable giving and voluntary efforts aimed at addressing social, cultural, and environmental issues Georg von Schnurbein, Marta Rey-Garcia & Michaela Neumayr, "Contemporary Philanthropy in the Spotlight: Pushing the Boundaries of Research on a Global and Contested Social Practice" (2021) 32:2 Volunt Int J Volunt Nonprofit Organ 185-193, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-021-00343-9>>..

56 Marty Sulek, "On the Modern Meaning of Philanthropy" (2009) 39:2 Nonprofit Volunt Sect Q 193-212, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764009333052>>.

57 Susan A Lord, "Wealth and Social Responsibility: Philanthropy and Social Service Giving in Southern Maine and Southern New Hampshire" (2009) 8:2 J Policy Pract 147-164, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15588740902740421>>; Jennifer McClendon, Njeri Kagotho & Shannon R Lane, "Preparing Social Work Students for Leadership in Human Service Organizations Through

philanthropic efforts will encourage activists to carry out agendas that help others. The range of actors also vary from individuals to big corporations, which are eventually defined as corporate social responsibility (CSR).⁵⁸ CSR, as a concept, emphasises the role of corporations in contributing to societal welfare through ethical business practices and philanthropic initiatives. Even when the aim is to aid the less fortunate,⁵⁹ a company's involvement in the charitable agenda through CSR has received criticism. According to Aguinis & Glavas⁶⁰ corporations prioritize business benefit and incentives from CSR programs over upholding their moral responsibilities. Moreover, some charitable agendas are pursued primarily to avoid paying taxes.⁶¹

Several studies demonstrate that humanitarian activities carried out by migrant workers vary and appear to be carried out with a genuine concern for humanity. In the case of the Algerian diaspora in the UK, humanitarian activism was particularly timely, important and necessary in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. This humanitarian movement was propelled by factors, including a strong sense of ethnic unity and the collective power of Islamic faith. Relationships and trust with local communities also support this idea.⁶² The role of Indian migrants in the US during the pandemic was not just to combat the virus on a daily basis, but also to contribute to the home country's challenges. Indeed, migrants actively take part in diplomacy; in this case, in helping the nation fight the spread of Covid-19, and promoting vaccination and recovery. The humanitarian activism of Indians abroad was greatly influenced by culture, ideology, and religious identity.⁶³ This scenario is also similar to that of domestic workers in the US, who arose in solidarity to help others during the pandemic. The particularly marginalized status of migrants in US society worsened the effects of the lockdown.⁶⁴ Thus, there

Student Philanthropy” (2016) 40:5 Hum Serv Organ Manag Leadersh Gov 500–507, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/23303131.2016.1173159>>.

58 Benedict Sheehy, “Defining CSR: Problems and Solutions” (2015) 131:3 J Bus Ethics 625–648, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-014-2281-x>>.

59 Arthur Gautier & Anne-Claire Pache, “Research on Corporate Philanthropy: A Review and Assessment” (2015) 126:3 J Bus Ethics 343–369, online: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24702754>>.

60 Herman Aguinis & Ante Glavas, “What We Know and Don't Know About Corporate Social Responsibility: A Review and Research Agenda” (2012) 38:4 J Manage 932–968, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206311436079>>.

61 Zhi Jin & Chenghao Huang, “Tax enforcement and corporate donations: evidence from Chinese ‘Golden Tax Phase III’” (2021) 9:4 China J Account Stud 526–548, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/21697213.2022.2053375>>.

62 Latefa Guemar, Jessica Northey & Elias Boukrani, “Diaspora activism and citizenship: Algerian community responses during the global pandemic” (2022) 48:9 J Ethn Migr Stud 1980–1997, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2031924>>.

63 Rahul M Jindal, Lyndsay S Baines & Deena Mehjabeen, “Reimagining diaspora diplomacy during the COVID-19 crisis in India” (2022) Int Health ihac019, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1093/inthealth/ihac019>>.

64 Anna Rosińska & Elizabeth Pellerito, “Pandemic Shock Absorbers: Domestic Workers' Activism at the Intersection of Immigrants' and Workers' Rights” in Anna Triandafyllidou, ed, *Migr Pandemics Spaces Solidar Spaces Except* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022) 123.

existed a high level of solidarity despite the stringent restrictions, as migrants were motivated to assist others through their sense of the lockdown's devastating effects.

The focus of this study is to explore how Indonesian migrant workers contribute to humanitarian efforts, specially through acts that involve considerable personal sacrifices – actions that go beyond typical social work. While religious and cultural ties have indeed proven to be successful motivators for engaging immigrants in humanitarian issues, this study investigates these ties in the context of demanding tasks such as digging graves or facilitating the repatriation of corpses. Such tasks are deemed to require a high degree of personal sacrifice due to their physical, emotional, and often socially unrecognised nature. The measure of 'significant personal sacrifice' in this context is evaluated based on the time, physical exertion, and emotional toll these tasks demand, contrasting with other forms of volunteerism like assisting during a pandemic, which, while critical, might not always involve the same level of personal or physical commitment. Thus, the aim of this research is not merely to highlight the contributions of migrant workers to humanity but to delve deeper into the nature of their contributions, particularly those that demand higher personal sacrifices. This exploration is essential to understanding the full spectrum of humanitarian actions undertaken by migrant workers, broadening the scope of existing literature on volunteerism and the role of cultural and religious motivations.

In summary, this review offers a fresh viewpoint to demonstrate that non-state actors also play a significant role in enacting the humanitarian agenda. Additionally, a hostile or unstable environment is not always necessary for humanitarian activism to take place. Although it has rarely been documented by prior academics, the willingness to make sacrifices for the greater good of humanity does exist among Indonesian migrant workers. Therefore, it is essential to look more closely at the dynamics in the field where Indonesian migrant workers undertake humanitarian and volunteer missions. At the very least, this may shine a brighter light onto the body of literature in this area of IR.

III. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study uses Indonesian migrant workers in Penang,⁶⁵ Malaysia as a case study, incorporating both primary and secondary data. For primary data, the researchers

65 Penang is selected as the site for this study due to several considerations. Penang is one of the major destinations for Indonesian migrant workers due to economic opportunities and its geographical proximity. The region hosts a diverse array of industries that attract migrant workers, including manufacturing, services, and construction making it a microcosm of the broader experiences of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. Furthermore, Penang's dynamic socio-economic environment provides a unique backdrop for examining the intersection of migration, labour, and humanitarian activities. By focusing on Penang, the research taps into a locale where the dynamics of migration, community engagement, and humanitarian activities are visibly intertwined, thereby offering insights that are both locally grounded and potentially generalisable to other migrant contexts. Please see Asma Idayu Izhar, Weng Wai Choong & Siaw Chui Wee, "Key determinants enhancing local community acceptance of migrant labour settlements in Seberang Perai, Penang, Malaysia" (2023) 34 City, Cult Soc 100533, online:

spent around two weeks in Penang to conduct fieldwork research, observing and interviewing Indonesian workers directly involved in humanitarian activities. Interviews were held with key respondents, such as members of the Indonesian society associations in Penang (*Persatuan Masyarakat Indonesia Penang*, PERMAI Penang) and the Muhammadiyah Penang Special Branch (*Pimpinan Ranting Istimewa Muhammadiyah*, PRIM Penang). According to observations made on the ground, there are still organisations that sustainably carry out humanitarian work. The two organizations above are seen as capable and have been a reference for many Indonesian migrant workers in Penang. In order to further analyse these actions, the research focuses on two groups: represented by Mr. Dimas and Mr. Siyat of PRIM Penang, and Mr. Agung from PERMAI Penang. They had been in Malaysia for more than 10 years and obtained the permanent resident visa. Those who failed to obtain a permanent resident permit usually obtained visa/working permits through local visa agencies and worked in non-formal sectors (such as garden decoration, house building, painting services, cleaners, electric technicians, etc.).

The method put forth by Franck & Anderson⁶⁶ in the construction of this work denotes that it is crucial to dig deeper into the field respondents' presentations. Using this rationale, this preliminary non-participant research can generally illustrate ways in which this humanitarian action manifests in real-life social contexts. This research is significant for its use of interviews, as IR scholars have neglected this qualitative approach of non-participant field research.

IV. THE INDONESIAN MIGRANT WORKERS' HUMANITARIAN ACTIVITIES

The interviewed informants hailed from both organizations - namely PERMAI Penang and PRIM Penang. Meanwhile, legal issues related to immigration documents are commonplace among Indonesian migrant workers, including those members in the organizations. Although by law, migrant workers are prohibited from marriage, some of them have married and even have children. Therefore, the following section examines the humanitarian activism among Indonesian migrant workers within three interrelated themes: action, motivation, and challenges.

<<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877916623000322>>; Amin Shabana et al, *Capacity Building Practices for Indonesian Migrant Workers: A Case Study from Penang and Hong Kong* (Atlantis Press, 2023).

66 Anja Karlsson Franck & Joseph Trawicki Anderson, "The Cost of Legality: Navigating Labour Mobility and Exploitation in Malaysia" (2019) 50:1-2 Int Q Asian Stud 19-38.

1. Actions

In carrying out humanitarian activities, Indonesian migrant workers make use of various channels, including friendship networks, family ties, and social media, to mobilize support and publicize their actions and donations. Against this backdrop, the following section examines the dynamics of their humanitarian work, as represented by individuals directly involved in high-risk-activities - ranging from assisting sick individuals to performing burials during the pandemic. This section sheds light on how they step up when the rubber meets the road, putting their commitment to humanity into practice under challenging circumstances.

Mr. Dimas from PRIM Penang, for instance, explained that most humanitarian activities focus on assisting Indonesian migrant workers encountering various difficulties. Some face serious health issues, ranging from strokes to death, while others experience problems related to immigration documentation. In cases of deceased migrant workers, PRIM Penang coordinates with other groups to manage the repatriation or local burial of the body once information about the death is obtained from colleagues, relatives, or the Malaysian police. According to Mr. Dimas, local police often contact him to help resolve matters related to the deceased. This form of humanitarian support has fostered close relationship between PRIM Penang members and local law enforcement. When handling a deceased worker's body, members have two options: return it to family in Indonesia or arrange burial at local Malaysian site. Regardless of the chosen method, necessary funds must first be secured. Often operating with limited resources, Mr. Siyat of PRIM Penang initiates donation drives to cover these costs. Traditionally, donations are collected from friends or relatives of the deceased, provided the individual's identity is known and there are no legal obstacles. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, have also proven effective for soliciting donations. Once sufficient funds are gathered, PRIM Penang members proceed with managing the body. If the identity is known, they coordinate directly with family members to facilitate repatriation. If unknown, they work with local authorities, including the police, to arrange a local burial. All activities are funded through contributions from the migrant workers community.

Meanwhile, PERMAI Penang plays a similar role and is noted for its relatively well-coordinated operations. According to Mr. Agung, the organization organizes its humanitarian activities into three main divisions: the education division (*garda pendidikan*/education guard), the humanitarian division (*garda kemanusiaan*/humanitarian guard), and the economic division (*garda ekonomi*/economic guard). Through the education division, PERMAI Penang established the English Academy Bengkulu Malaysia Branch - a collaboration with English Academy Bengkulu and the State Islamic Institute of Bengkulu, Indonesia. The academy offers free English courses primarily to Indonesian migrant workers employed in Penang's manufacturing sector, aiming to equip them with language skills that provide a competitive edge in the labour market. The humanitarian division is PERMAI Penang's most active arm and carries out missions similar to those of PRIM Penang.

Activities include assisting sick migrants, repatriating deceased workers to their families, and arranging local burials. A key difference is that PERMAI Penang obtains information about deaths directly from hospitals. The organisation exercises caution when soliciting donations via social media platforms like Facebook, due to the risk of misuse or exploitation by irresponsible actors. Mr. Agung noted that during the repatriation process, coordination with the National Agency for the Protection of Migrant Workers (BP2MI) is essential. The entire operation - from hospital handover to burial - is funded through donations from the migrant community. By contrast, the economic division of PERMAI Penang has faced challenges in implementing some of its initiatives, primarily due to capital and investment constraints.

The humanitarian activism carried out by Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia is particularly noteworthy. It manifests primarily through targeted social services, including funeral management and educational initiatives for the migrant community. Empirical evidence indicates that funeral arrangements represent the most frequent area of need, often prompting donation drives predominantly supported by Indonesian donors in Penang. Funeral management services provided by both PERMAI and PRIM Penang are highly valued by the migrant community; a need that became especially pressing during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, both organizations faced immense pressure due to the large number of deceased individuals requiring assistance, a significant portion of whom were Indonesian migrant workers.



Figure 1. The burial process of the bodies of Indonesian migrant workers in local cemeteries in Malaysia during the Covid-19 pandemic

Source: Author's collection

The above description illustrates how Indonesian migrant workers have undertaken humanitarian work with remarkable dedication, leveraging every available resource despite the limitations of living in a foreign country. While they possess networks, their ability to capitalise on these connections is truly extraordinary, particularly given that they voluntarily perform tasks that would normally fall under the responsibility of official authorities. In other words, they possess significant social capital and the skill to put it to use effectively.⁶⁷ Of particular interest is their adept use of social media. In the digital era, social media literacy has already taken root among migrant workers in contexts such as

67 Nancy Kracke & Christina Klug, "Social Capital and Its Effect on Labour Market (Mis)match: Migrants' Overqualification in Germany" (2021) 22:4 *J Int Migr Integr* 1573-1598, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-021-00817-1>>.

Hong Kong⁶⁸, Taiwan,⁶⁹ Australia,⁷⁰ and others. Scholars have highlighted that social media has become an essential platform for supporting humanitarian activities,⁷¹ disaster mitigation,⁷² and broader humanitarian interventions.⁷³ However, the work carried out by PERMAI and PRIM Penang goes far beyond what has seen previously documented. Their actions represent a remarkable phenomenon and constitute a significant contribution to the discourse on humanitarian activities undertaken by migrant workers – individuals traditionally perceived as a vulnerable group.⁷⁴ Indeed, these workers not only respond effectively in critical situations but also demonstrate that, through initiative and strategic use of social networks, marginalised actors are capable of delivering significant humanitarian interventions that challenge conventional expectations.

2. Motivation

Behind the various humanitarian activities carried out by Indonesia migrant workers, including the use of diverse resources such as social media, lie profound motivations that drive their dedication despite the vulnerabilities and limitations inherent in their migrant status. This section explores how actors themselves narrate the motivations behind their unwavering commitment to selfless humanitarian work, particularly within the two organisations, PERMAI and PRIM Penang.

Within PRIM Penang, Mr. Dimas was asked about his motivations for assisting and managing the bodies of Indonesian migrants in Penang. He responded with evident emotion, emphasising that his actions were driven entirely by humanitarian concern. While acknowledging his personal limitations, he expressed faith that divine guidance

68 Panizza Allmark & Irfan Wahyudi, “Female Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers in Hong Kong: A Case Study of Advocacy through Facebook and the Story of Erwiana Sulistyaningsih” in Catherine Gomes, ed, *Asia-Pacific Age Transnatl Mobil Search Community Identity through Soc Media* (Anthem Press, 2016) 19; Citra Hennida, Kandi Aryani & Sri Endah Kinasih, “The use of social media among Indonesia’s Migrant Workers (IMWs)” (2021) 34:1 Masyarakat, Kebud dan Polit 13–22, online: <<https://e-journal.unair.ac.id/MKP/article/view/21951>>.

69 A Maksum, C-L Tsay & A Muhammad, “Indonesian migrant workers in Taiwan: The state dilemma and people’s realities” (2020) 24:1 J Ilmu Sos dan Ilmu Polit.

70 Elsa Underhill et al, “Using social media to improve temporary migrant workers’ access to information about their employment rights” (2019) 84 J Aust Polit Econ 147–174, online: <<https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.979354673681917>>.

71 *Social media and inclusion in humanitarian response*, by O Lough, in *HPG working paper* (London, 2022) online: <<https://odi.org/en/publications/social-media-and-inclusion-in-humanitarian-response>>.

72 Sameer Kumar et al, “Social media effectiveness as a humanitarian response to mitigate influenza epidemic and COVID-19 pandemic” (2022) 319:1 Ann Oper Res 823–851, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10479-021-03955-y>>.

73 Michelle J Lee, “Media influence on humanitarian interventions: analysis of the Rohingya refugee crisis and international media coverage” (2021) 6:1 J Int Humanit Action 20, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-021-00108-5>>.

74 Muhammad Zahrul Anam et al, “COVID-19 and Decent Work: Online Media Coverage on Indonesian Female Migrant Domestic Workers in Malaysia and Taiwan” (2021) 11:2 Sociol y tecnociencia 160–193, online: <<https://revistas.uva.es/index.php/sociotecnol/article/view/5423>>.

would enable him to perform good deeds. He was also conscious of the challenges of working in Penang but felt a strong moral calling to serve others. Likewise, Mr. Siyat, another PRIM Penang member, highlighted that their principal motivations were the desire to help others and empathy for fellow Indonesians.

The interviewees also noted persistent challenges despite their commitment. One key difficulty was locating deceased individuals. Some Indonesian migrant workers lived in isolation, spending long periods alone at home. This behaviour might reflect personal preference for seclusion or a conscious decision to limit interactions with other Indonesians. Such individuals often formed close bonds with non-Indonesians, including migrants from Bangladesh and other countries. This social isolation complicated the identification and assistance of deceased workers, with some being discovered only days or weeks after death, often after neighbours reported noticeable odors to local authorities.

Regarding PERMAI, Mr. Agung stated that their motivation to assist others is entirely humanitarian. Despite occasional criticism from some Indonesian migrant workers or community members, he viewed these reactions as positive, interpreting them as an incentive for other groups to engage in similar humanitarian work. Both PERMAI and PRIM Penang often cover operational expenses from their own resources, reflecting a commitment to resolving issues regardless of personal cost. Their efforts have been recognised within the Indonesian community, particularly by the Indonesian consulate in Penang, which has expressed significant appreciation. These organisations are frequently the first point of contact when problems arise involving Indonesian citizens abroad, demonstrating how their humanitarian activism supports the Indonesian government in addressing the needs of its citizens.

Interviews revealed that many of those involved in these humanitarian activities come from low - to middle-income backgrounds yet migrated for variety of reasons. Some hold diplomas and belong to Indonesia's intellectual community. Their capabilities are further shaped by the strong intellectual foundations of PERMAI and PRIM Penang. Both organisations also maintain a solid religious foundation, and field observations shows that they sustain extensive networks, enabling the effective execution of humanitarian tasks. Religious and social motivations converge to create a powerful force that empowers migrant workers to provide aid to those in need.

In this context, it is evident that Indonesian migrant workers exhibit a strong sense of moral calling to assist their fellow compatriots. A pronounced sense of solidarity exists among migrant in Malaysia, fostering mutual support within the community.⁷⁵ Furthermore, religious background plays a significant role in shaping their actions,

75 Andrea Borello & Mark Friis Hau, "Solidarity with and against: Exploring Group Identification among Precarious Migrant Workers" (2025) *Sociology* 00380385251339590, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385251339590>>.

guiding them to act with sincere intentions purely for the sake of goodness and divine approval. Some activists with strong educational and educational foundations appear particularly effective in responding to crisis and mobilising solidarity, despite the fact that the majority of Indonesian migrant workers have limited formal education. Overall, a combination of religious influence and shared experiences of hardship motives these workers to engage in selfless humanitarian assistance toward their fellow Indonesian migrants.⁷⁶

3. Challenges

Migrant workers often come from a weak economic position. Field observations understood this weakness in correlation to the limited resources for humanitarian work, which are often at a minimum level. Despite this, they strive to undertake humanitarian action due to a sense of humanity. One key success of the humanitarian work has been seen in the full support from fellow workers, which ensured that their missions could be successfully carried out. Indeed, there are three critical contexts that are considered to contain challenges, namely: 1) within the humanitarian migrant workers' group; 2) the conditions within or surrounding the victims; and 3) at bureaucratic levels.

First, several issues are presented within the migrant workers' humanitarian activists: including a lack of financial capability, time management, and silent competition among humanitarian organizations. Nevertheless, this situation has not lead to any problematic processes of body management, as the sense of humanity amongst workers is observed to dominate over other sentiments.

The second challenge regards the victim themselves; meaning that the discovered dead body presents problems early in the management process. This is largely due to the body not having any immigration documents such as a passport, permanent resident ID, Indonesian ID, or other official identifications. Such situations require humanitarian activists to trace heirs, relatives, guardians or those who could identify the body of Indonesian migrant workers. The unclear status of the body also could also influence the burial process – specifically, in the decision to bury the body in Malaysia or in Indonesia. Such difficulties are indeed common among undocumented workers.⁷⁷

The third obstacle encountered by migrant workers engaged in humanitarian action is on the bureaucratic level. In general, having an Indonesian representative is essential, as institutions have become primary places for Indonesians to voice complaints regarding migrant worker issues. However, when it comes to dead bodies, Indonesian authorities face several challenges: including a lack of operational employees, and limited availability

76 Rudolf Yuniarto, "Beyond Ethnic Economy": Religiosity, Social Entrepreneurship, and Solidarity Formation of Indonesian Migrants in Taiwan" (2021) 20:1 *Makara Hum Behav Stud Asia* 1–14.

77 Karen Hacker et al, "Barriers to health care for undocumented immigrants: a literature review" (2015) 8 *Risk Manag Healthc Policy* 175–183, online: <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2147/RMHP.S70173>>.

of additional funding for the handling of dead bodies. Consequently, the Indonesian representative assumes responsibility for administrative procedures, such as issuing a death certificate. Amid a slow bureaucratic system, the government often experiences pressure primarily when cases attract media attention, highlighting the expectation for authorities to act promptly in order to maintain public trust.⁷⁸

However, administration procedures within Indonesian institutions may run slowly, whereas migrant workers' religious beliefs stipulate that the body should be buried promptly. This situation highlights that government policies are frequently unresponsive to the community's need for timely action and may conflict with local norms and customs, including religious norms, indicating a need for policy adjustment.⁷⁹ This tension is worsened by the minimal financial support from the Indonesian authority in Penang. Consequently, migrant workers' activists must rely on donations and other outside financing sources. As far as Indonesian representatives are concerned, they exclusively take care of the Indonesian migrant workers when they deceased at the shelter house, or at a temporary location inside an Indonesian institution.

These dynamics reveal that immigrants, including vulnerable migrant workers, are frequently required to navigate bureaucratic system that can be slow, unresponsive, or even discriminatory. Such experiences have become part of their lived reality, shaping how they interact with local authorities and institutions.⁸⁰ while they understand and accept their status as newcomers, recognising the necessity of adhering to local laws and regulations,⁸¹ they also harbour expectations for governance that respect their dignity and humanity. Particularly in times of crisis, such as dealing with illness, death, or other urgent needs, migrant workers hope for administrative systems that are not only sufficient but also emphatic and sensitive to their circumstances.⁸² This tension between legal compliance and humane treatment highlights a broader challenge for host-country governance, namely creating policies and administrative process that uphold the rule of

78 Martin Scott, Mel Bunce & Kate Wright, "The Influence of News Coverage on Humanitarian Aid: The Bureaucrats' Perspective" (2022) 23:2 *Journal Stud* 167-186, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.2013129>>.

79 Gianluca Iazzolino, Eleonora Celoria & Amarilli Varesio, "The Algorithmic-Bureaucratic Precarization of Migrant Food Delivery Workers in Italy" (2025) *Int Migr Rev* 01979183251343886, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183251343886>>; Cecilia Menjivar, "Immigration bureaucracies and state-created categories across the globe" (2025) 48:4 *Ethn Racial Stud* 927-947, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2024.2404492>>.

80 Catherine Schmidt et al, "Navigating bureaucratic violence in Canada's two-step immigration system" (2023) 49:19 *J Ethn Migr Stud* 4887-4906, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2235905>>.

81 Ali Maksum, "Indonesian migrant workers' multi-track diplomacy for education rights in Penang, Malaysia" (2025) *Diaspora, Indig Minor Educ* 1-13, online: <<https://doi.org/10.1080/15595692.2025.2492549>>.

82 Fitria Naeli, "Protection on Indonesian Migrant Workers Under The Indonesia-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (IJEPA)" (2025) 3:02 *West Sci Soc Humanit Stud* 316-330, online: <<https://doi.org/10.58812/wsshs.v3i02.1724>>.

law while addressing the unique vulnerabilities of migrant populations, thereby ensuring their protection, inclusion, and equitable treatment.⁸³

V. CONCLUSION

The humanitarian activism of migrant workers significantly contributes to humanity within communities of migrant workers, as recognised and studied by IR scholars. This humanitarian activism supports Indonesian migrant workers to voluntarily help fellow countrymen facing difficulties, on both case-by-case and ongoing bases. Equally vital, they maintain close and constructive relations with key members of the local society, including police and community leaders. Their actions in this humanitarian context contribute to trust and confidence-building with the locals. This study has contributed to discussions of theories regarding migrant workers' humanitarian activism in IR. It offers the fresh perspective that non-state actors also play a significant role in enacting the humanitarian agenda. Additionally, it demonstrates that a hostile or unstable environment is not always necessary for humanitarian activism to take place. Even though it has rarely been documented by prior academics, the willingness to make sacrifices for the greater good of humanity does exist among Indonesian migrant workers.

In this context, the humanitarian activism among Indonesian migrant workers composes of three interrelated themes: action, motivation, and challenges. First, the agenda of humanitarian activism has been expressed through specific activities within social services, namely funeral management and providing education for Indonesian migrant workers. However, empirical studies show that funeral activities are perceived as frequent events, requiring actors to call for donations, mainly from Indonesian donors in Penang. Second, religious and social motivations combine to form potent forces that can support migrant workers and provide aid to those in need. Their operations are conducted purely for humanitarian purposes. Third, obstacles exist, following bureaucratic problems faced mainly by migrant workers engaged in humanitarian engagement. Furthermore, financial obstacles could be overcome with the full support of their co-workers, whose support enabled tasks to be completed effectively. Under these themes, it can be understood that migrant worker solidarity is growing due to a sense of humanity, as demonstrated by humanitarian activists.

This study has sought to conceptualize and empirically demonstrate the humanitarian activism of migrant workers, however research within different locations is still needed. When it comes to responding to humanitarian action, various circumstances in the environments and nations where migrant workers labour need to be investigated more fully. Additionally, varied research rigors and data collection methods may result in differing discoveries that influence theoretical development and policy design.

83 Joseph Trawicki Anderson, "Managing labour migration in Malaysia: foreign workers and the challenges of 'control' beyond liberal democracies" (2020) *Third World Q* 1-19.

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