Muhammadiyah's Dilemma in Assisting the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis in Myanmar

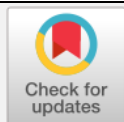## Marha Fathu Masturah Adam * iD, and Surwandono iD

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the strategies employed by Muhammadiyah in addressing the humanitarian crisis affecting the Rohingya ethnic group in Myanmar, along with its positioning within international policy frameworks. A qualitative method was used, incorporating in-depth interviews with the chairman and vice chairman of the Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Center (MDMC), who served as key actors in aid distribution in Myanmar, along with three other representatives from Muhammadiyah's leadership. Secondary data, including academic journals, news articles, online sources, and literature reviews, were also utilized to support the analysis. The findings reveal that Muhammadiyah faces various social, political, and cultural challenges in Myanmar, including local resistance, the politicization of aid, and language barriers. Unlike state-led humanitarian interventions, Muhammadiyah operates under regional diplomatic constraints. These conditions require adaptive negotiation strategies with both governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. This study highlights the critical role of faith-based organizations in humanitarian diplomacy and offers a comparative perspective on Muhammadiyah's position alongside international actors such as UNHCR and ICRC. It emphasizes the need for cross-cultural communication training, integration with ASEAN's humanitarian frameworks, and stronger institutional partnerships to improve the sustainability of humanitarian missions. Academically, this research contributes to the discourse on humanitarian diplomacy by exploring the intersection of religious-based humanitarianism and international political dynamics. Practically, it provides policy recommendations to enhance aid effectiveness in conflict-affected areas.

1. Introduction

The Rohingya conflict in Myanmar represents a complex humanitarian crisis rooted in the politicization of religious and ethnic differences between the Muslim Rohingya and the Buddhist Bamar majority. The Myanmar government and Buddhist nationalist groups have constructed an exclusive national identity that frames the Rohingya as illegal immigrants, despite their long-standing presence in the region (Sinaga et al., 2024). In addition to religious and ethnic tensions, the ambitions of major corporations to control mining areas have further intensified the crisis. Since the 1990s, Myanmar's military junta has engaged in forced land seizures, exacerbating the conflict in Rakhine State, particularly since 2012 (Hasymi, 2020). Systematic discrimination has been institutionalized through state policies, including the denial of citizenship to the Rohingya (Sassen, 2017), which has deprived them of access to basic services and legal protections. As a result, thousands have fled to neighboring countries such as Bangladesh, triggering international condemnation of human rights violations (Azizah, 2018).

Despite international attention, ASEAN's response to the Rohingya crisis remains constrained by the non-interference principle that underpins its member states' foreign policy (Morada, 2021). The ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance (AHA) Centre has become the main instrument for delivering aid, but it lacks the mandate to exert political pressure on the Myanmar government (Barber & Teitt, 2021). In this context, the role of civil society organizations, including Muhammadiyah, becomes increasingly significant in addressing the gaps left by regional mechanisms.

Muhammadiyah, Indonesia's largest Islamic socio-religious organization, is committed to promoting a socially just society based on the principles of Islam as a mercy to all. It serves as a problem solver at both the national and international levels through a progressive and moderate approach (Nashir, 2015). Muhammadiyah actively engages in global dialogues, education, and humanitarian missions addressing Islamophobia and extremism (Masmuh, 2020). Its humanitarian involvement includes aid responses to disasters such as the Kashmir earthquake in Pakistan and international crises in Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, Mindanao in the Philippines, and the Rohingya in Myanmar (Termawut, 2023).

In Myanmar, Muhammadiyah's operations face limited access due to international legal restrictions on non-state actors working in conflict zones. Unlike the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which holds a global mandate (Lewis, 2012), or the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which negotiates access under the principle of neutrality (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2014)Muhammadiyah must coordinate with Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to obtain operational permits. This demonstrates that Muhammadiyah's humanitarian diplomacy is not solely philanthropic, but also requires negotiations with the Indonesian government and local stakeholders in Myanmar to ensure effective aid delivery.

In Islamic values, Muhammadiyah upholds social justice, tolerance, and peace in contributing meaningfully to global humanitarian issues (Amal & Olifiani, 2023). The Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Center (MDMC) is its disaster response arm. It is the only organization in Indonesia whose Emergency Medical Team (EMT) is recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO). For international humanitarian missions, Muhammadiyah established Muhammadiyah AID (Aliansi Kemanusiaan Indonesia) in 2017 (Al-Haq, 2019).

In delivering aid to the Rohingya, Muhammadiyah faces challenges shaped by social disaster contexts. Social, political, and cultural barriers influence the effectiveness of its humanitarian mission in fragile environments (Minear & Smith, 2007). Social obstacles include ethnic and religious tensions, which lead to perceptions of bias even when Muhammadiyah intends to remain neutral. Local communities often reject external interventions, fearing they may escalate existing tensions. Additionally, limited access to information and communication fosters mistrust between refugees and aid providers. Community structure and dynamics in such contexts, particularly in conflict zones, pose further challenges (Ginting, 2023). These factors must be considered to ensure Muhammadiyah's aid is effective and positively received.

Political barriers are particularly significant, as political uncertainty affects access and authorization from local authorities. Local governments may hesitate to grant access because international organizations could destabilize political conditions. These challenges compel Muhammadiyah to engage in adaptive negotiation strategies. Aid from international organizations is often politicized, with distribution driven not by actual need but by political interests (Salsabila & Aswar, 2023). Muhammadiyah may find itself in situations where assistance is directed only to government-supported groups, overlooking those most in need.

Cultural challenges are also crucial. Understanding community-specific norms and traditions is essential for successfully accepting aid (Barus et al., 2024). Practical approaches in one culture may not be appropriate in another, potentially leading to rejection. Gender norms, for instance, may limit women's participation in aid decision-making (Rimbawan & Nurhaeni, 2024). Language differences further hinder direct communication with the Rohingya community, increasing the risk of miscommunication and reduced effectiveness.

Compared to organizations such as Dompet Dhuafa, UNHCR, and ICRC, Muhammadiyah faces greater challenges in fundraising and accessing conflict zones. Dompet Dhuafa relies heavily on crowdfunding and partnerships with international agencies (Dompet Dhuafa, 2020), while UNHCR and ICRC benefit from stronger legitimacy in operating in sensitive areas (Debuf, 2015). These limitations compel Muhammadiyah to adopt adaptive strategies in humanitarian diplomacy, including building alliances with local organizations and negotiating access through informal diplomatic channels.

This research argues that Muhammadiyah, as a faith-based international actor, experiences a humanitarian dilemma in responding to the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar. The dilemma arises from the complex social, political, and cultural obstacles it faces. Through in-depth interviews with the chairman and vice chairman of MDMC, along with three Muhammadiyah administrators, this study aims to analyze the strategies used by Muhammadiyah to overcome these challenges and deliver effective humanitarian aid.

This article builds upon and extends earlier research on Muhammadiyah's role in humanitarian diplomacy. Husein et al. discussed Muhammadiyah as a model of faith-based organization involved in global humanitarian engagement (Husein et al., 2024). Mahdi analyzed its involvement in the Israel-Palestine conflict through the lens of civil society participation (Mahdi, 2024). Meanwhile, Surya et al. focused on Muhammadiyah AID's efforts to provide educational access for Rohingya communities (Surya et al., 2023). Unlike these studies, which tend to highlight success stories, this article shifts attention to the practical dilemmas faced on the ground, such as rejection by local communities, the politicization of aid delivery, and communication challenges that have not been sufficiently addressed in previous literature.

The study places Muhammadiyah's humanitarian engagement within the context of ASEAN geopolitics and international legal frameworks. Rather than viewing humanitarian

action as a neutral intervention, it reveals how religious-based organizations must constantly negotiate between moral commitments, legal restrictions, and political sensitivities. In the case of Muhammadiyah, this negotiation requires institutional cooperation with the Indonesian government and careful positioning concerning Myanmar's internal politics and ASEAN's diplomatic norms.

Through this lens, the research offers insight into Islamic humanitarian actors' everyday dilemmas when operating across borders, particularly in contested and politically fragile regions. The analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how faith-based diplomacy unfolds, especially when formal international mechanisms fall short or remain constrained by non-interference principles.

2. Literature Review
2.1. Humanitarian Diplomacy

According to Larry Minear and Hazel Smith, humanitarian diplomacy is vital for addressing crises, particularly in establishing protective measures for populations threatened by armed conflict or natural disasters (Minear & Smith, 2007). This definition emphasizes the creation of "humanitarian space," where aid organizations can carry out their missions independently, without interference from political or military authorities, while adhering to humanitarian principles and organizational integrity.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) defines humanitarian diplomacy as "persuading decision makers and opinion leaders to act, at all times, in the interests of vulnerable people, and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles" (International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2015). This concept centers on influencing those in positions of power to protect, rescue, and prioritize the welfare of vulnerable individuals, particularly victims of armed conflict and natural disasters.

Donelli traces the evolution of humanitarian diplomacy from Henry Dunant's experiences during the Battle of Solferino in 1859 (Donelli, 2017). This historical foundation began modern humanitarian efforts, which gained broader international recognition in the 1990s. This development reflects the growing role of non-state actors in conflict resolution and in shaping the global humanitarian landscape, especially concerning civilian protection.

Bogatyreva highlights a more collaborative approach to humanitarian diplomacy, involving multilateral institutions such as the United Nations, international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and donor states (Bogatyreva, 2022). These actors contribute financial support and resources and coordinate action to ensure effective and efficient aid distribution.

Harroff-Tavel notes that humanitarian diplomacy is not limited to organizations like the IFRC or ICRC. NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières, Oxfam International, and CARE International also play a crucial role in reducing human suffering and advocating for the interests of affected populations (Harroff-Tavel, 2005). These organizations negotiate with national and international actors and serve as neutral intermediaries to ensure that the voices of victims are acknowledged.

Geremedhn and Gebrihet explain that state and non-state actors participate in humanitarian diplomacy (Geremedhn & Gebrihet, 2024). This includes multilateral UN agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP), the World Health Organization (WHO), UNICEF, UNHCR, and OCHA, alongside international NGOs, regional bodies, and local civil society organizations.

Hazel Smith analyzes humanitarian diplomacy through several dimensions, including its objectives, functions, methods, and actors. This classification helps clarify the complex nature of humanitarian diplomacy and the interplay between its various components (Minear & Smith, 2007).

The first type identified by Smith focuses on the tension between diplomacy, which often prioritizes national political and security interests, and humanitarian work, which seeks to protect human life and well-being above all else. In many situations, diplomats must balance these competing interests, while humanitarian actors advocate for a neutral space where human needs precede political considerations. This classification illustrates the inherent difficulty in integrating political diplomacy with humanitarian imperatives, especially when these goals conflict (Ayasreh, 2023).

The second type emphasizes that humanitarian diplomacy has become a routine component of modern conflict dynamics. In such contexts, humanitarian personnel cannot operate independently from state authorities or other actors. Achieving humanitarian goals requires negotiation, advocacy, and communication skills to influence outcomes and secure access for aid.

The third type highlights the moral dilemmas faced by humanitarian actors. In high-conflict zones, neutrality is often unattainable. Organizations must sometimes prioritize alleviating suffering over remaining politically disengaged, which introduces difficult choices in interacting with competing political forces (Minear & Smith, 2007).

A study by E.J. Clements adds further perspective by exploring the roles of humanitarian organizations operating in particularly volatile environments. Focusing on the Houthi conflict in Yemen and the independence struggle in Myanmar, Clements shows that humanitarian workers often serve as aid providers and mediators between international institutions and complex local realities (Bogatyreva, 2022). These organizations thus play a broader role in shaping dialogue, influencing policy decisions, and coordinating among stakeholders, including state and international bodies.

2.2. Public Diplomacy

Public diplomacy, or multi-track diplomacy, has become increasingly relevant in today's globalized world. International engagement is no longer limited to state actors; individuals and organizations outside government structures now play a significant role in international relations (Damayanti, 2020). These actors include academics, business leaders, activists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious groups, and the general public. The rapid development of communication technologies has further facilitated these interactions, expanding the reach and impact of non-state diplomatic initiatives (Hennida, 2009).

A comparison between traditional and public diplomacy reveals substantial differences in approach and purpose. Traditional diplomacy is conducted primarily by states and focuses on formal negotiations between governments, often resulting in agreements such as trade deals or international treaties. In such contexts, states are the sole authority responsible for decisions, and negotiations are typically confined to high-ranking officials and professional diplomats (Ma'mun, 2012).

In contrast, public diplomacy adopts a more inclusive approach by incorporating civil society actors, often represented by non-governmental organizations and community-based groups. This inclusion accommodates public aspirations and helps bridge the gap between government decisions and broader societal needs (Djelantik, 2016). Muhammadiyah's active

role in addressing the Rohingya humanitarian crisis in Myanmar exemplifies how non-state actors can practice public diplomacy.

Paul Sharp conceptualizes public diplomacy as a process aimed at advancing the interests and values represented by a given state (Ham, 2010). Similarly, Condoleezza Rice, through her framework of Transformational Diplomacy, defines public diplomacy as a government's effort to implement foreign policy and promote national interests through direct communication with foreign publics (Ham, 2010).

Despite the expanding role of non-state actors, there remains debate over who the legitimate public diplomacy actors are, particularly in domestic dimensions. Rationalist perspectives acknowledge space for non-state engagement but continue to view the state as the primary coordinator of public diplomacy. From this view, domestic public actors are often seen as passive participants (Rachmawati, 2016).

Jan Melissen defines public diplomacy as a process to build mutual understanding and relations between governments and foreign publics through effectively communicating ideas, values, norms, culture, and national goals (Melissen, 2005). In this understanding, diplomacy is no longer the sole domain of state actors. The public also participates actively through various forms of engagement.

While Melissen acknowledges the contribution of non-state actors, he uses the term "government-driven" to emphasize that the state remains the principal authority in public diplomacy initiatives (Melissen, 2011). Even though NGOs and corporations can contribute meaningfully, the state often maintains dominance, especially in areas related to national security (Nye, 2008). Thus, although non-state actors play a supporting role, the state's central position remains intact mainly (Rachmawati, 2016).

Jay Wang further elaborates that public diplomacy encompasses multiple dimensions and pursues three core objectives (Wang, 2006). The first is to promote national agendas and policy positions to the international community. The second is to convey values and attitudes that help shape the country's global identity. The third is to foster understanding and trust between a country and foreign publics, which is crucial for building stable and constructive relationships.

To achieve these objectives, governments must design effective communication strategies that collaborate with non-state actors such as multinational corporations and NGOs and engage in direct dialogue with foreign publics (Hayden, 2012). In this way, public diplomacy can serve as a powerful tool to address global challenges and build cooperative networks for implementing policies that benefit all stakeholders (Martha, 2020).

2.3. Soft Power and Transnational Advocacy Networks

In humanitarian diplomacy, the role of non-governmental organizations such as Muhammadiyah can be better understood through the combined lens of two key concepts: soft power and transnational advocacy networks. Integrating these concepts allows for a comprehensive theoretical framework to analyze how Muhammadiyah operates as a humanitarian actor and as an influencer of policy and public opinion within the global sphere, particularly in response to humanitarian issues such as the Rohingya crisis.

The notion of soft power, developed by Joseph Nye, refers to the ability of a state or entity to influence others through attraction rather than coercion. According to Nye, this power derives from culture, values, and policies others perceive as legitimate or admirable (Nye, 2008). Within humanitarian diplomacy, Muhammadiyah exercises soft power through Islamic values that promote the principle of *rahmatan lil-'alamin*, or "a mercy to all creation." By advancing these values, Muhammadiyah is not merely delivering aid but is also cultivating a

reputation as a morally and ethically responsible humanitarian actor in the eyes of the international community.

Muhammadiyah's soft power approach is reflected in its efforts to build constructive relationships with foreign governments and international organizations. This includes active participation in global forums and collaborations with humanitarian institutions. Muhammadiyah demonstrates its organizational capacity through these partnerships and reinforces its moral legitimacy. In the case of the Rohingya crisis, the values promoted by Muhammadiyah help construct a positive narrative that encourages international cooperation and enhances the organization's standing as a non-state actor committed to humanitarian causes.

Meanwhile, the Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) concept, developed by Keck and Sikkink, provides a broader understanding of how organizations like Muhammadiyah engage in global issue advocacy. TANs involve networks of actors, including NGOs, religious institutions, media, and academics, who collaborate to raise awareness and build international support for particular causes (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). In the case of the Rohingya, Muhammadiyah has been part of a broader advocacy network that goes beyond direct aid, promoting human rights and justice for the Rohingya people.

Through its participation in transnational advocacy, Muhammadiyah has collaborated with various stakeholders to urge the Indonesian government and the international community to adopt more decisive measures in addressing the Rohingya crisis. These efforts include engagement in international forums and humanitarian alliances such as the Indonesian Humanitarian Alliance for Myanmar (AKIM), which coordinates support and solidarity across sectors. Such collaborations demonstrate a strategy that strengthens Muhammadiyah's role as a leading humanitarian advocate on the international stage.

Rather than acting solely as a provider of humanitarian aid, Muhammadiyah has gradually assumed a more strategic role in shaping perceptions of moral legitimacy and contributing to national and international policy discourses. Its ability to integrate Islamic ethical values with global advocacy puts it within a unique position, allowing the organization to assert influence beyond emergency relief and into normative diplomacy. This evolving role reflects how non-state actors, when embedded in transnational networks and supported by soft power capital, can become credible interlocutors in humanitarian and political arenas traditionally dominated by states.

The theoretical framework connecting soft power and TANs illustrates how Muhammadiyah has emerged as a change agent within humanitarian diplomacy. By advancing ethical values and forging collaborations with actors across international networks, Muhammadiyah is engaged in field-based humanitarian action and plays an active role in shaping more responsive policy outcomes. This analysis offers clearer insight into the organization's contributions and potential in addressing global challenges while affirming its identity as a value-driven institution recognized beyond national borders.

3. Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative approach to understand social phenomena and human behavior by exploring the experiences, perspectives, and meanings constructed by individuals or groups. Rather than relying on numerical data, this approach emphasizes context and the complexity of social life through narrative accounts, detailed descriptions, and in-depth analysis. Data collection techniques include interviews, observations, and document analysis (Sugiyono, 2020).

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Primary data regarding the humanitarian crisis was gathered from national and international news sources and official United Nations websites. Interview data were obtained from five key respondents, as detailed in the following table:

Table 1. Interview Respondent Data

Respondent	Position	Method
Budi Setiawan	Chairman of the Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Center (MDMC)	In-person at MDMC Headquarters, Yogyakarta
Rachmawati Hussein	Vice Chair of MDMC	WhatsApp Video Call
Bachtiar	Member of Muhammadiyah Aid	WhatsApp Chat
Edi Suryanto	Director of Finance, Lazismu	WhatsApp Chat
Riya Andriyani	Finance Executive, Lazismu	WhatsApp Video Call

Source: Created by the authors

As shown in **Table 1**, this study conducted in-depth interviews with five Muhammadiyah officials. Budi Setiawan, Rachmawati Hussein, and Bachtiar were directly involved with the Rohingya community. The remaining two respondents, Edi and Riya, served as supporting sources to enrich the information provided by the three main participants. One of the five respondents was interviewed in person, while the others participated via WhatsApp.

The respondents were selected based on their relevance and direct involvement in Muhammadiyah's humanitarian mission. Purposive sampling was used, targeting individuals with firsthand experience in humanitarian operations in Myanmar and who possessed insight into the organization's policies and strategies for navigating operational challenges.

Although the number of respondents is relatively small, their contributions reflect the multifaceted difficulties encountered by the organization in executing its humanitarian efforts. In qualitative research, sample sizes are typically smaller than in quantitative studies because the emphasis is placed on depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization.

Data triangulation was employed by cross-referencing interview information with secondary sources to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. These included academic journals, official websites of Muhammadiyah, Lazismu, and Dompet Dhuafa, and reports from international humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR and ICRC. In addition, policy documents from the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs concerning the Rohingya conflict were reviewed. This triangulation process aimed to increase data accuracy, minimize potential bias, and strengthen the credibility of the findings by comparing various information sources.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, a method suitable for identifying patterns and recurring themes in interview data. This technique effectively reveals the challenges and strategies Muhammadiyah encountered in its humanitarian work in Myanmar.

The analysis process began with verbatim transcription of the interview data to ensure accuracy. The transcripts were then coded, with specific data segments assigned to categories corresponding to the key challenges: social, political, and cultural. After coding, the next step involved identifying overarching themes by examining patterns and connections across the data. These themes helped link the observed challenges to the strategies implemented by Muhammadiyah.

In the final stage, interpretation was conducted by contextualizing the emerging themes within relevant theoretical frameworks and comparing them with secondary data. This process allowed the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the dilemmas faced by Muhammadiyah in its efforts to respond to the Rohingya humanitarian crisis.

4. Results and Discussion

Muhammadiyah's efforts to assist the Rohingya humanitarian crisis in Myanmar encountered obstacles across three dimensions: social, political, and cultural. These are summarized in the following table:

Table 2. Social, Political, and Cultural Barriers Faced by Muhammadiyah

Aspect	Barrier	Muhammadiyah's Strategy
Social	Rejection from local communities	Communication with the Myanmar and Indonesian governments
Political	Politicization of aid distribution (legitimacy issues)	Strengthening government-to-government aid channels
Cultural	Religious and language differences	Inclusive approaches and collaboration with local organizations

Source: Compiled by authors from multiple references

As **Table 2** illustrates that one of the key social barriers is the rejection by local communities, making it difficult for Muhammadiyah, a non-governmental organization, to operate directly within conflict zones. Budi Setiawan, in an interview, emphasized:

> *"The situation in Myanmar during the conflict was highly concerning. The Rohingya community had no access to aid from other countries, international organizations, or external actors. This made it difficult for states and organizations, including Muhammadiyah, to deliver humanitarian assistance. Moreover, resistance from the Buddhist community and other groups in Myanmar toward foreign intervention was perceived as a factor that could further inflame tensions." (Setiawan, 2024)*

Faced with local community resistance, Muhammadiyah sought to initiate communication with the Myanmar government to secure operational approval. However, the organization did not have the authority to engage directly with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. This limitation stemmed from Myanmar's restrictive stance toward external involvement in the Rohingya conflict and its rejection of international intervention (Islam & Rahman, 2022).

In response, Muhammadiyah opted to engage the Indonesian government, specifically through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the leadership of Minister Retno Marsudi. This indirect approach was considered more effective for opening diplomatic pathways to Myanmar. Rachmawati Hussein explained:

> *"Muhammadiyah cannot negotiate directly with Aung San Suu Kyi, a representative of the Myanmar government. Therefore, we communicated with Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, hoping that through their diplomatic channels, Muhammadiyah and other Indonesian organizations would be able to deliver aid to the Rohingya more effectively, without facing rejection from either the local communities or the Myanmar authorities." (Hussein, 2024)*

Before the violent escalation in August 2017, Muhammadiyah had already been involved in humanitarian efforts for the Rohingya community. In late 2016, the organization co-founded the Indonesian Humanitarian Alliance for Myanmar (AKIM), a coalition of eleven humanitarian agencies. These included Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Center (MDMC), Dompet Dhuafa, Daarut Tauhid, PKPU, Rumah Zakat, Nahdlatul Ulama's LPBI, LAZIS Wahdah, LMI, LDII, Social Trust Fund of UIN Jakarta, and Aksi Cepat Tanggap (Rabbani, 2018).

The coalition organized a public demonstration in front of the Myanmar Embassy in Jakarta in September 2016 to express concern about the crisis. AKIM also planned the "Humanitarian Flotilla for Rohingya," a mission aimed at delivering food and medical supplies to conflict-affected areas. Additionally, they urged the Indonesian government to intensify diplomatic pressure on Myanmar to end structural violence and to lift blockades that had restricted humanitarian access for organizations from Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries (Aceh Journal National Network, 2016).

According to Ade Salamun, Executive Director of LAZIS Dewan Dakwah, the Indonesian Humanitarian Alliance for Myanmar (AKIM) was informally established in November 2016 and began assisting victims of violence in Rakhine shortly thereafter (Hidayat, 2017). Rachmawati Hussein, one of AKIM's founding members, elaborated:

> *AKIM was created to provide a protective umbrella for Indonesian NGOs operating in Myanmar. The Myanmar government officially approved the alliance, which facilitated the entry of Muhammadiyah and other Indonesian NGOs to deliver humanitarian assistance. However, cooperation and support from Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs remained essential." (Hussein, 2024)*

Muhammadiyah conducted two visits to Myanmar to distribute aid to approximately 125,000 displaced persons living in camps around the capital of Sittwe. Beyond immediate relief, the organization also initiated development-oriented programs, including a proposal for a "peace market" model, which served as a platform for interaction between Rohingya and non-Rohingya communities. Hussein (2024) said these efforts helped AKIM members, including Muhammadiyah, gain greater acceptance from local communities and the Myanmar government.

The second major challenge faced by Muhammadiyah was political. As outlined in **Table 2**, this involved the politicization of aid distribution, particularly under Myanmar's military junta, which imposed severe restrictions on access to Rohingya communities. The junta's crackdown, following allegations involving attacks on police posts in August 2017, triggered a violent military response in Rakhine State and prompted a mass exodus of Rohingya to Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh (ICRC, 2015). As political tensions escalated, Muhammadiyah's aid activities were suspended, unable to continue due to the deteriorating security situation (AFP, 2022). Budi Setiawan stated in an interview:

> *"Since the outbreak of large-scale conflict, Muhammadiyah has faced numerous challenges, especially concerning access to the conflict zones in Rakhine State. The Indonesian government has also advised AKIM against operating in Myanmar, citing the inability to ensure the safety of Indonesian citizens working in the area." (Setiawan, 2024)*

The volatile political conditions in Myanmar forced Muhammadiyah and AKIM to relinquish direct aid distribution. Instead, assistance had to be channeled through government mechanisms. This made Muhammadiyah heavily reliant on Indonesia's diplomatic engagement to secure humanitarian access, particularly as Myanmar restricted entry to Cox's Bazar and other conflict areas.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi was dispatched to Nay Pyi Taw to meet with State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to overcome these political obstacles. The meeting, held at the Presidential Office, was part of a broader diplomatic mission from President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo to express Indonesia's concerns over the humanitarian crisis in Rakhine. Retno's visit aimed to offer Indonesia's assistance in resolving the conflict and to ensure that Indonesian humanitarian organizations, including Muhammadiyah, would be granted access to carry out their missions effectively (Office of Assistant to Deputy Cabinet Secretary for State Documents & Translation, 2017).

In facing political constraints, Muhammadiyah reinforced its alignment with the Indonesian government's diplomatic efforts toward Myanmar. This dependency was reflected in the operational requirement that Muhammadiyah and AKIM wait for directives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs before delivering aid. Restrictions on visa issuance and entry permits prompted Muhammadiyah to adopt a more inclusive and flexible posture to ensure the continuity of its humanitarian mission. As Rachmawati Hussein explained:

> *"Muhammadiyah employed a calculated strategy to address the challenges of humanitarian access following the outbreak of conflict. This involved formal meetings with the Myanmar Ambassador in Jakarta, the Indonesian Ambassador to Myanmar, and the Indonesian Ambassador to Bangladesh. These efforts led to a letter of recommendation granting access to Cox's Bazar, where hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees lived in dire conditions. Muhammadiyah shifted its focus from development assistance in Myanmar to emergency response in Cox's Bazar by deploying medical personnel and collaborating with NGOs in Dhaka to provide health services and logistical aid. However, the deployment of health workers was halted in November 2017 due to unresolved humanitarian visa issues. Efforts to secure special visa permits through negotiations with the Bangladeshi government were unsuccessful, thereby limiting Muhammadiyah's humanitarian activities." (Hussein, 2024)*

Government-mediated access inevitably raised the risk of aid politicization, as Muhammadiyah's operational reach became confined to zones officially approved by the Myanmar authorities. For instance, access was often restricted to select areas, while others, such as Maungdaw, a region with a significant Rohingya population, remained classified as a "red zone" requiring military clearance. As a result, Maungdaw was frequently overlooked by many aid organizations despite its high vulnerability. Through negotiations with local officials in Maungdaw, Muhammadiyah and AKIM eventually succeeded in reaching and delivering aid to communities within and around the restricted areas (WIZ (Wahdah Inspirasi Zakat), 2017).

As shown in Table 2, the final set of barriers confronted by Muhammadiyah was cultural, including differences in religion and language. Muhammadiyah, representing an Islamic organization, faced significant challenges operating in a predominantly Buddhist society. Muhammadiyah adopted an inclusive approach to mitigate potential tensions, positioning itself

as a neutral humanitarian rather than a religious entity. This strategic neutrality also influenced the composition of deployed personnel, as explained by Budi Setiawan:

> *"Muhammadiyah emphasized an inclusive approach in delivering aid, maintaining religious neutrality at all times. Given the sensitive context in Myanmar, our teams were predominantly male to avoid religious profiling or association with the Rohingya identity. Due to the conflict, we prioritized safety and selected personnel accordingly."* *(Setiawan, 2024)*

Language was another critical challenge. Communication difficulties hindered interactions with Rohingya communities due to the shortage of volunteers proficient in the local language. While one or two physicians acted as team leads, they could not dedicate themselves fully to humanitarian coordination due to their primary medical responsibilities. Hussein noted:

> *"Muhammadiyah only had general volunteers, not specialized humanitarian personnel. This limitation reduced our capacity to engage with Rohingya communities effectively. As a result, we sought support from the international community, including collaboration with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which had a well-established operation in Myanmar."* *(Hussein, 2024)*

The language barrier also had implications for training-based programs. For instance, vocational programs conducted through Muhammadiyah's community training centers (BLK) were designed to reduce unemployment among displaced Rohingya. However, poor English proficiency among local participants complicated the implementation. Muhammadiyah partnered with NGOs in Yangon, Sittwe, and Cox's Bazar to overcome this. These collaborations were essential for bridging communication gaps and ensuring that humanitarian messages were conveyed effectively (Surya et al., 2023).

To further assess the effectiveness of Muhammadiyah's strategies, the following section presents a comparative analysis between Muhammadiyah and other humanitarian organizations, such as Dompet Dhuafa (a fellow AKIM member), and international agencies like UNHCR and ICRC. The comparison focuses on funding mechanisms, aid mobilization capacity, and access to affected populations.

Table 3. Comparative Approaches of Muhammadiyah and Non-Muhammadiyah Organizations

Intervention Type	Muhammadiyah	Dompet Dhuafa	UNHCR	ICRC
Fundraising	Relies on donations from members and the Muslim community in Indonesia	Relies on public crowdfunding and domestic donations	Funded by UN member states	Funded through voluntary donations and donor states
Aid Mobilization	Coordinated through the Indonesian government and local partnerships	Similar government coordination with stronger NGO outreach	Operates through global networks with access to conflict zones	Operates in war zones with intense neutrality-based negotiations

Intervention Type	Muhammadiyah	Dompet Dhuafa	UNHCR	ICRC
Access to Beneficiaries	Limited to areas approved by the Indonesian and Myanmar authorities	Depends on partnerships with UNHCR and international NGOs	Strong international legitimacy to access conflict-affected areas	Can negotiate access based on neutrality and humanitarian law

Source: Compiled by the authors from various references.

Table 3 highlights a comparative overview of Muhammadiyah's humanitarian strategies alongside other domestic and international organizations within the context of aid for the Rohingya crisis. One of Muhammadiyah's key advantages lies in its community-based and faith-driven approach, which has helped foster close connections with Rohingya beneficiaries, many of whom share a Muslim identity. This affinity allows Muhammadiyah to understand local needs and social dynamics more intimately. However, the organisation faces limitations in access and funding, which affect the scale and sustainability of its operations compared to international agencies such as UNHCR and ICRC.

Dompet Dhuafa, a non-Muhammadiyah Indonesian NGO, follows a similar operational pattern but adopts a different fundraising strategy. It enjoys greater financial flexibility by relying heavily on crowdfunding and grassroots contributions (Dhuafa, 2016). Furthermore, Dompet Dhuafa frequently collaborates with international partners such as UNHCR, which enhances its reach and operational capacity (Dompet Dhuafa, 2020), compared to Muhammadiyah's more internally focused network.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) demonstrates a distinct advantage in operating in conflict zones due to its globally recognized neutrality (Mourey, 2013). This principle allows ICRC to negotiate access and deliver aid even in active war zones, where other organizations face severe restrictions (Basaran, 2020). Nevertheless, Muhammadiyah's model offers a unique value by emphasising grassroots engagement and community empowerment, particularly in integrating economic and social development components into relief programs for Rohingya communities.

Similarly, UNHCR possesses legal and institutional legitimacy backed by UN member states, enabling it to access remote and politically sensitive areas easily (Betts et al., 2008). As the lead UN agency for refugees, UNHCR coordinates emergency relief and legal protection for the Rohingya (Andriani et al., 2024; UNHCR, 2025). Its ability to negotiate directly with the Myanmar and Bangladeshi governments provides a strategic advantage over Muhammadiyah, which must rely on Indonesian diplomatic support to gain operational access. This contrast illustrates the limited trust and recognition that community-based actors like Muhammadiyah receive from host states compared to intergovernmental bodies.

In evaluating Muhammadiyah's long-term impact, it is important to consider how its humanitarian diplomacy strategies could be sustained and strengthened. One critical factor is the diversification of funding sources. Muhammadiyah must develop long-term financial models to enhance sustainability through strategic partnerships with international organizations such as UNHCR, ICRC, or the ASEAN Humanitarian Assistance (AHA) Centre. By adopting a hybrid funding approach—combining domestic donations with institutional grants—Muhammadiyah could increase its financial resilience and expand its mission reach.

Moreover, enhancing humanitarian diplomacy capacity is essential. Muhammadiyah should leverage its global Islamic networks and ASEAN ties to strengthen its role in public

diplomacy. Establishing stronger connections with the AHA Centre could offer regional legitimacy and improve its standing as a key humanitarian actor for Southeast Asia. In doing so, Muhammadiyah's interventions would be framed not as isolated relief efforts but as integral components of a coordinated regional response.

Adapting to the geopolitical realities of ASEAN is another strategic necessity. Given the non-intervention principle upheld by ASEAN member states, Muhammadiyah must ensure that its humanitarian missions are not perceived as political interference. A trilateral cooperation model involving Indonesia, Myanmar, and Bangladesh could offer a viable framework. Since Bangladesh is the primary host of Rohingya refugees, its involvement could enrich humanitarian planning with additional resources and regional legitimacy.

Muhammadiyah's humanitarian diplomacy efforts could become more effective and sustainable through three key measures: diversified funding, strengthened diplomatic engagement, and geopolitical adaptation. If these strategies are implemented, Muhammadiyah has the potential to emerge as a globally recognized and effective faith-based humanitarian organization.

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, the limited number of respondents, only five Muhammadiyah leaders, restricts the generalizability of the findings, especially in capturing diverse field-level experiences. Although purposive sampling was used, broader perspectives may not be fully represented. The reliance on remote interviews via WhatsApp, with only one conducted in person, also reduced the depth of field exploration regarding the complexities in Myanmar and direct refugee conditions.

Another limitation stems from secondary data, including reports, news, and NGO publications, which may lack firsthand refugee perspectives. Future research should involve a larger and more diverse group of respondents, including frontline volunteers and relevant stakeholders. Ethnographic or direct observational methods in refugee sites are also recommended to collect richer primary data.

5. Conclusion

Muhammadiyah's strategies for overcoming social, political, and cultural barriers have proven strategic and effective in navigating the complex humanitarian landscape in Myanmar. By employing a combination of humanitarian diplomacy and public diplomacy, Muhammadiyah addressed key dilemmas in providing aid to the Rohingya ethnic group amidst a fragile and restrictive environment.

To further enhance the effectiveness of its humanitarian missions, Muhammadiyah is encouraged to diversify its funding strategies by building partnerships with international organizations and engaging the private sector. Strengthening diplomatic networks with global Islamic institutions and equipping volunteers with intercultural communication skills will also improve the delivery and acceptance of aid. On the governmental side, Indonesia should expand its role in regional humanitarian diplomacy by establishing adaptive trilateral collaboration mechanisms and streamlining regulatory procedures related to cross-border humanitarian assistance. These reforms are crucial to enable civil society organizations to respond more swiftly and efficiently to urgent needs.

This study is limited by its reliance on perspectives from Muhammadiyah actors, without incorporating views from the beneficiary communities or Myanmar government representatives. Future research could benefit from ethnographic fieldwork in Rohingya refugee camps and a more in-depth policy analysis of Indonesia's humanitarian engagement at the ASEAN level. Further studies might also explore how faith-based organizations can

contribute more effectively to humanitarian diplomacy through regional and international cooperation frameworks.

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The authors have declared no potential conflicts of interest regarding this article's research, authorship, and/or publication.

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