

Promoting hospitality and protection: The role of faith-based organizations in the arrival of Rohingya refugees in Aceh, Indonesia

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Abstract

In the arrivals of Rohingya refugees in Aceh, Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) leverage religious traditions and ethical values to foster government and community support. This study examines the role of three FBOs—Yayasan Kemanusiaan Madani Indonesia (YKMI), Dompot Dhuafa (DD), and Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Indonesia—in facilitating refugee reception and advocating for their basic rights. Through field interviews and thematic analysis, we explore how religious motivations, rooted in theological principles and ethical traditions, inspire both institutional and personal commitment to promoting hospitality and protection. Religious identity allows FBOs to mobilize communities, leverage moral authority with religious leaders to counter negative narratives, and advocate for more humane policies. Beyond providing material assistance, the FBOs help shape discourse on dignity, hospitality, and protection in Indonesia's refugee context by bridging the gap between state institutions and local communities.

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Keywords

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Introduction

The arrival of Rohingya refugees in Aceh Province, Indonesia, was first recorded on 07 January 2009 with an initial group of 197 refugees and has continued until early 2025 with a total of 45 official landings ([KontraS Aceh, 2026](#)). By the end of 2025, the total number of Rohingya refugees had reached more than 6,848 people. Looking at the history of the arrivals of Rohingya refugees in Aceh, most of them came from refugee camps in Bangladesh, and the numbers vary each year ([KontraS Aceh, 2026](#)). The highest number occurred in 2015 with 1,668 people across four locations (Seunuddon, Langsa, Kuala Simpang, and Julok) and later, in 2023, with 2,039 people in 15 locations (Lamnga, Lampanah, Tangan-Tangan, Peureulak, Muara Tiga, Beurandeh Batee, Pulee Batee, Jangka, Muara Batu, Madat, Ujong Kareung, Ie Muelee, Blang Raya, Blang Ulam, and Kuala Idi) ([KontraS Aceh, 2026](#)). In 2023, some boats had to make several landings after experiencing rejections and even pushbacks out to sea ([BBC News Indonesia, 2023](#)). The number of landings and refugees subsequently shifted throughout 2024–2025, with 892 refugees recorded as having arrived and 76 reported missing at sea, across seven locations: Kuala Parek, Kuala Bubon, Desa Pasar, Meunasah Asan, Matang Peulawi, Peureulak Barat, and Peureulak ([KontraS Aceh, 2026](#)). It should be noted that these figures are pre-registration data, which refers to the actual number of refugees on arrival. Some refugees had left the landing sites before official registration by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) could take place ([Indonesia, 2025](#)).

These continued and often dangerous influxes present a significant humanitarian and social challenge for Indonesia, a country that has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention ([Missbach, 2017](#)). The recent increase in local rejections and pushbacks of refugee boats, as seen in late 2023 and early 2024, has created a new layer of complexity and urgency, highlighting the fragile nature of initial community hospitality ([Viartasiwi and Missbach, 2023](#)). While initial hospitality has been driven by Acehese local cultural values, namely, *peumulia jamee* (honoring guests) and *hukum adat laot* (customary maritime law) ([McNevin and Missbach, 2018](#)), the recent rejections underscore that this goodwill is not always sufficient or sustainable. In this volatile context, faith-based organizations (hereafter referred to as FBOs) have emerged as crucial actors. This study argues that their religious motivations are not limited to providing aid; they serve as a moral and social force that actively promotes and sustains the principles of hospitality and protection, countering a more hostile state-level response and negative public discourse.

This study aims to fill a significant research gap by specifically analyzing the sustained and programmatic involvement of FBOs in the Rohingya refugee issue in Indonesia. While existing literature has noted the role of religious communities or has

focused on FBOs in other humanitarian crises (Baidhaw, 2015; Husein et al., 2024; Rachmawati et al., 2022), little has been done to examine how FBOs, through their distinct religious identity and networks, actively promote hospitality and protection for refugees in a context marked by shifting local attitudes and inadequate state policy (Bush, 2022; Hoffstaedter, 2017; McNevin and Missbach, 2018; Nagel, 2023).

This research was supported by narratives from refugees themselves. Ahmad (pseudonym), a Rohingya, whom we met in May 2023 in Pidie Regency, Aceh, shared his story with us. Ahmad fled with his family after experiencing prolonged suffering in Cox's Bazar. He stated, "I would rather die at sea with a glimmer of hope in my hand than die succumbing to the brutality of the gangsters in Cox's Bazar."¹ Ahmad and 68 others boarded a simple wooden boat, which finally washed up on the coast of Lampanah, Aceh Besar, in February 2023 after being adrift at sea for almost a month.

The perilous journey from Bangladesh to Aceh was recounted by Faisal (pseudonym), a Rohingya refugee we met at Mina Raya Camp, Pidie Regency. On 08 January 2023, Faisal and 184 others fled to Kutupalong camp in Cox's Bazar on a wooden boat facilitated by a Bangladeshi smuggler. After 10 days at sea, the vessel ran out of fuel and drifted in rough waters. On the 14th day, they encountered an Indian naval patrol, which engaged three days later to provide limited fuel, water, and food. However, upon reaching Andaman waters, the boat emptied its fuel again, and the captain and five crew members abandoned the refugees. Left adrift, the refugees—including 45 minors—improvised a tarpaulin sail to harness the winds. After 29 days at sea, they finally landed in Ladong, Aceh. Tragically, the journey claimed the life of one child, underscoring the profound human cost of these irregular maritime movements.² Faisal's account illustrates the perilous nature of Rohingya refugees' journeys across the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, a reality that has been extensively documented by various institutions (see Amnesty International 2015; Heiduk and Missbach, 2020; Mixed Migration Centre, 2022; UNHCR Indonesia, 2024).

This refugee testimony provides the critical context needed to understand the role of FBOs. By detailing life-threatening vulnerabilities and forced immobility at sea, these personal accounts demonstrate the urgent need for the hospitality and protection FBOs seek to provide. Connecting individual suffering to the broader humanitarian mission transforms the organization's work from an abstract concept into a direct, necessary response to real human crises.

The process of receiving Rohingya arrivals in Aceh has involved the participation of local communities as well as the cross-sector coordination between the government, security forces, and humanitarian organizations (Indonesia, 2025; Jumadi, 2025; Missbach, 2017). However, this process has presented a significant challenge, requiring extensive persuasion and social engagement to build support from the various stakeholders. With the continued arrival of Rohingya refugees, various humanitarian and human rights actors (UN agencies, namely, UNHCR and International Organization for Migration (IOM), as well as local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as KontraS Aceh, Yayasan Geutanyoe, Rumah Relawan Remaja, and Yayasan Saluran Internasional) are involved in the handling process, including FBOs. The involvement of FBOs reflects the expansion of the spectrum of non-state actors in

refugee-protection issues, as well as the potential of religious ethics to be a foundation for advocacy and solidarity across borders.

Considering their programmatic and continued involvement in refugee issues in Aceh, we choose to discuss the involvement of three prominent FBOs, namely, Yayasan Kemanusiaan Madani Indonesia (YKMI), Dompot Dhuafa (DD), and the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Indonesia. The study aims to analyze how these organizations, rooted in Islamic traditions for YKMI and DD and in Catholic traditions for JRS Indonesia, have carried out not only humanitarian assistance but also provided hospitality and protection for Rohingya refugees stranded in Aceh. We argue that religious values lived by FBOs play an important role both at the personal level as an inspiration for volunteers, and at the institutional level as a guide in decision-making and leadership. The study also aims to fill the research gap in the field of FBO active participation in addressing refugee issues in Indonesia. Research on FBOs in Indonesia has mostly been focused on their involvement in addressing humanitarian issues, such as FBO support during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Prianto et al., 2023; Rachmawati et al., 2022) and after the tsunami in 2004 (Baidhawiy, 2015). Some research has discussed refugee issues from the perspective of religious communities without explicitly mentioning FBOs (Darnela, 2021). This study also wants to highlight that the increasing active role of humanitarian acts by FBOs in Indonesia contributes to strengthening the “shifting power of relations from North-South development assistance towards South-South partnership” (Fountain et al., 2015, as cited in Bush, 2022). The success of this shifting power relies on the willingness of FBOs to collaborate across religious traditions to provide sustainable sources of funds and political solutions for refugees.

The discussion draws on fieldwork conducted in Aceh. We used purposive sampling as a research method to select informants who are particularly knowledgeable and experienced, thus providing relevant data (Palinkas et al., 2015). To collect data, we interviewed six staff members from both management and field levels at each of the three selected FBOs, ensuring a comprehensive, multi-level perspective. The interview data were then processed using thematic analysis to identify key themes regarding the FBOs’ role in promoting hospitality and to conduct critical interpretations. Thematic analysis is much more than simply summarizing the data; it interprets the data (Ahmed et al., 2025).

Prior to the interviews, all study participants provided written informed consent covering the research purpose, procedures, risks, benefits, and their right to withdraw. They were also informed about confidentiality measures and data handling. We affirm that all participants have been anonymized and that identifiable details have been carefully excluded to protect their privacy.

To deepen the interview data, we also analyzed the FBOs’ implemented programs for Rohingya refugees in Aceh, which helped formulate our questions and explore hospitality issues. Additionally, our discussion draws on local mass media and online reports to incorporate diverse perspectives and analyses. Furthermore, our analysis also refers extensively to previous research that discusses refugee issues in Indonesia (e.g., Dewansyah and Nafisah, 2021; Kneebone et al., 2021).

The dynamics of refugee reception in Aceh, Indonesia

Decades of ongoing structural and systemic ethnic and religious violence in their country of origin, Rakhine State, Myanmar—combined with increasing security risks and harsh conditions in refugee camps such as Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh—have fueled a wave of high-risk secondary migration of Rohingya people, both by sea and by land, to Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, particularly to Aceh Province. Aceh serves primarily as a temporary transit point, as most Rohingya exercise personal choice to migrate onward to Malaysia to escape socio-legal stasis (Missbach, 2017). As Indonesia has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the handling of refugees in Indonesia currently refers to Presidential Regulation (PR) No. 125 of 2016 (Republic of Indonesia, 2016), which is the main legal basis for the procedures of discovery, shelter, security, and immigration supervision of refugees. Moreover, although PR 125/2016 has been enacted, it has not led to any significant improvements in the management or attention given to refugees arriving in Indonesia (Kneebone et al., 2021). It has not been sufficient to promote the optimal operationalization of humanitarian policies, or the effective response and coordination between national and local levels, or the fulfillment and implementation of good practices in refugee protection.

Based on Article 28G Amendment II of the 1945 Constitution (Republic of Indonesia, 2000) and Law No. 39 of 1999 on Human Rights, Article 28 (Republic of Indonesia, 1999), Indonesia recognizes the constitutional right of every person to seek asylum and freedom from torture. Although PR 125/2016 regulates the handling of refugees in Indonesia, the regulation still has several shortcomings, particularly in providing legal certainty. To overcome these limitations, various other sources have been used as references.³

Although Law No. 39 of 1999 on Human Rights recognizes the right of every person to seek asylum for political protection (Republic of Indonesia, 1999), the treatment of refugees in Indonesia has undergone a significant shift. This shift culminated in the enactment of Law No. 6 of 2011 on Immigration (Republic of Indonesia, 2011). This law focuses heavily on irregular migration and criminalizes foreigners who do not have valid travel documents and visas. As a result, the view of refugees has shifted from a human rights-based paradigm to an immigration paradigm that prioritizes security (Kneebone et al., 2021). It appears that PR 125/2016 tends to adhere to this immigration paradigm in its implementation.

This PR 125/2016 is seen as a way for the state to shift the responsibility for refugees onto international organizations (UNHCR, IOM) and local governments. By delegating the role of determining refugee status to the UNHCR, the state effectively avoids its direct obligation to implement the constitutional right to asylum. This regulation lacks legal clarity (derivative regulations), political will (Dewansyah and Nafisah, 2021), and delegates responsibility to local governments without adequate financial and policy support. There is a need for more detailed legislation that can strengthen the legal framework. Such a policy should sensitize immigration and

judicial officials so that they prioritize a rights-based rather than a security-based approach.

One aspect that has been overlooked in the implementation of PR is the participation of the Acehnese community and local communities in rescuing stranded refugees. PR 125/2016 Article 5 only mentions coordination by official state agencies: “The discovery of refugees in emergency situations in Indonesian waters shall be coordinated and carried out by agencies that administer search and rescue operations.” Although the regulations clearly stipulate who is responsible, in practice the government’s response has been slow and, in the field, it is often fishermen who discover refugees and who, motivated by their custom of *peumulia jamee*, take the initiative to help them.

Local Acehnese communities—particularly fishermen and village leaders—have generally responded to the arrival of Rohingya refugees with hospitality. For years, the Acehnese fishing community has demonstrated humanitarian solidarity through rescue efforts, guided by the cultural values of *peumulia jamee* and *hukum adat laot*, which are deeply rooted in Acehnese tradition and Islamic teaching (McNevin and Missbach, 2018; Viartasiwi and Missbach, 2023). *Peumulia jamee* is a local expression of the Islamic ethic of hospitality that emphasizes respect for guests and protection of the weak. The tradition of *peumulia jamee* in Acehnese culture is not just about hospitality but a holistic way of life that intertwines social norms, religion, and cultural identity (Meliza et al., 2024: 5). This tradition demands that every member of the community welcome guests with kindness, prepare special dishes, and show deep respect. *Peumulia jamee* is reinforced by *hukum adat laot*, Aceh’s customary maritime system. This system is administered through the *panglima laot* (Acehnese Chief Marine Officer), which not only regulates fisheries governance but also guides maritime morality, including responsibility for any life in danger at sea.

In the context of refugee rescue, the *panglima laot* often acts as a collective mobilizer and mediator between the community, customary values, and outsiders (Listriani and Kadir, 2019; Raharema, 2024). Although the *panglima laot* has no official legal authority, in practice, the officer is involved in providing first aid due to their role as a traditional maritime leader responsible for security and well-being in the maritime area (Tunnur and Malahayati, 2025: 6). Thus, the practice of *peumulia jamee* and the traditional institution of *panglima laot* have enabled the Acehnese to respond generously to the Rohingya refugees, beyond even the refugee law. As analyzed by McNevin and Missbach (2018: 299), the local wisdom symbolizes a collective act of friendly welcome and solidarity, where this act “mandated welcome on the basis of their humanity alone, without seeking clarification as to the strangers’ status or authorization to be where they were.” The practice of *peumulia jamee* is intertwined with religious values, whereby breaching this code of conduct would cause misfortune.

After having long been recognized for their hospitality toward Rohingya arrivals—perhaps one of the reasons refugees have continued to choose Aceh as a landing point—several incidents of rejection occurred between late 2023 and early 2024. On 19 November 2023, a group of residents of Jangka, Bireuen, and Muara Batu, North Aceh, pushed a boat with 249 Rohingya refugees back into the sea. In March 2024, some residents of Johan Pahlawan, West Aceh District, Aceh, evicted Rohingya

refugees who occupied the former office building of the local Indonesian Red Cross (Kompas, 2024; Raharema, 2024; Viartasiwi and Missbach, 2023). The motivations behind these rejections are not yet totally clear. Independent investigations have revealed allegations that state officials were involved in funding anti-refugee mass mobilization and spreading hate propaganda on social media, which led to actions against refugee landings (Tempo, 2023). Other sources have also made accusations that the government's negligence has been the main cause of this grim situation due to the debate over which government level (central or provincial) should be responsible for budget allocation for the refugees (Raharema, 2024; Suaka, 2023).

The civil society organizations (CSOs), FBOs, local religious actors, and traditional leaders responded to the rejection immediately. For instance, on 17 November 2023, Indonesian civil society organizations condemned the government's refusal to allow a boat carrying about 249 Rohingya refugees, mostly women and children, to land safely in Aceh, despite urgent humanitarian needs and legal obligations under Presidential Regulation No. 125/2016 and international law (Suaka, 2023). The statement from the Indonesian civil society organizations highlights repeated pushbacks out to sea in unsafe conditions, exposing refugees to further risks of illness, death, and exploitation, while noting that local villagers and fishermen provided emergency assistance. It criticizes Indonesia's failure to uphold humanitarian commitments, including the principle of non-refoulement and pledges made in international forums, and it calls on national and regional authorities to immediately implement proper coordination. FBOs, while criticizing the government's failure, also remind the Acehnese communities of their traditions and religious values that emphasize hospitality toward strangers. In that joint statement, it was stated clearly: "We may have to remember again, [that] our society (Aceh) is an open society" (see Civil Society Organizations Observing Refugee and Asylum Seekers Issues in Indonesia, 2023).

Beyond critique and press releases, FBOs provided concrete contributions. Collaborating with other NGOs, they immediately dispatched food and essential aid to stranded boats. Furthermore, FBOs actively coordinated and lobbied local governments (*pemerintah daerah*) to secure emergency temporary shelters. This successful lobbying provided a viable option for accommodation, ultimately removing the central and local governments' justification for rejection.

Faith in action: FBOs responses for Rohingya refugees in Aceh

The term "faith-based organization" (FBO) arguably lacks a universal definition, and there is no clear consensus regarding its exact meaning. It generally refers to non-profit entities affiliated with a religious group or a particular system of spiritual belief, and which pursue charitable, educational, and social goals (Bielefeld and Cleveland, 2013). The widely used definition of FBOs is "those humanitarian relief and development organizations formed by or with a direct or indirect relationship to a specific faith community" (Khafagy, 2020: 3). In implementing their programs, FBOs "are guided by and embody the core values and beliefs of the religious traditions with which they are affiliated" (Clarke and Jennings, 2008: 6, as cited in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011: 430).

Thus, FBOs are characterized by their strong religious motivations, which mobilize volunteers and donations to be involved in humanitarian acts as part of their religious duties (Bielefeld and Cleveland, 2013). What distinguishes FBOs from secular NGOs is their explicit religious identity, which shapes their work, and the integration of faith-based values into their mission and operations (Ferris, 2005).

In Aceh, aside from the UNHCR, the IOM, and secular NGOs, there are also FBOs that play a role in humanitarian work. Notable examples include YKMI, JRS Indonesia, and DD. Other FBOs have also been present and engaged temporarily, such as LazisMu (Lembaga Amil Zakat Muhammadiyah), MDMC (Muhammadiyah Disaster Management Center), and Human Initiative (Human Initiative, 2020; LazisMu, 2024). For this study, however, we selected YKMI, JRS Indonesia, and DD, as these three organizations have continued their involvement in the Rohingya refugee issue in Aceh.

The core strength of FBOs is their capacity for flexible action, enabling them to look beyond rigid donor rules and program designs to make the lives of refugees their first and foremost priority. YKMI often utilized domestic monetary *zakat* donations to immediately fulfill essential needs for refugees in temporary camps, even as they simultaneously served as UNHCR implementers. In contemporary Indonesia, *zakat* has evolved from a ritual of worship into a crucial instrument for socio-economic justice and community empowerment (Retsikas, 2014). Under contemporary Islamic jurisprudence, refugees are included in categories like *ibnu sabil* (stranded wayfarers) or *riqab* (the liberation of human rights), allowing modern faith-based organizations to flexibly utilize *zakat* funds for their immediate relief and long-term economic empowerment (Malahayati, 2016).

DD showed programmatic flexibility by making a breakthrough interpretation of the *asnaf* category (a term for groups entitled to receive *zakat*, or charity) in 2015, ensuring that refugees could be included as *mustahik* (people who receive *zakat* in accordance with Islamic religious provisions) (Interview with DD management staff, 28 March 2025; see also Malahayati, 2016). *Zakat* is one of the five Islamic pillars (*arkan al-Islam*), which literally means purity, growth, and full of goodness. In Islamic legal theory, *zakat* means a religious duty incumbent upon Muslims to give a certain amount of their wealth to recipients under specific conditions (Chaerunnisa et al., 2025). JRS demonstrated its adaptive capacity by providing emergency assistance within 72 hours when there was an emergency condition, including a ship landing (JRS Indonesia, 2024). This is where FBOs are more flexible and able to fill communication gaps that are usually simple but essential.

Islamic FBOs: Yayasan Kemanusiaan Madani Indonesia and Dompot Dhuafa

Yayasan Kemanusiaan Madani Indonesia (YKMI) provides humanitarian services, focusing on the areas of emergency response, clean water provision, economic empowerment, strengthening the quality of education, and religious activities. The vision of YKMI is to “protect and provide support to the poor and disaster victims in a sustainable, useful and efficient way to achieve a world without poverty” (YKMI,

2022). In its mission and values, YKMI explicitly uses Islamic values as its foundation and states: “In accordance with the values of our faith (Islam), we work for the community to be able to handle disasters, and for the community to become independent with sustainable development” (YKMI, 2022).

YKMI bases its organization on Islamic values, which function as a moral and spiritual force in mobilizing public support. The principles of *rahmatan lil ‘alamin* (compassion for all nature), *al-‘adl* (justice), *amanah* (responsibility), and *ihsan* (doing good to the maximum) (YKMI, 2022) become the ethical and foundational values of all its services. In various moments, YKMI uses Qur’anic verses and *hadith* to emphasize the humanitarian message of Islam, such as the words of the Prophet Muhammad in The Quran 5:32, “whoever saves one, it is as if he had saved mankind entirely” (Saheeh International Translation, 2010). With this religious narrative, YKMI builds awareness that accepting refugees is not only a humanitarian act but also a part of worship and an expression of faith. Since 2020, YKMI has implemented UNHCR programs providing food and non-food items in Aceh’s refugee camps, a response aligned with the organization’s vision and mission. In addition to being a UNHCR implementer, YKMI secures domestic zakat donations to sustain refugees in under-resourced temporary camps (Interview with YKMI management staff, 06 April 2025). By utilizing a religious narrative, YKMI promotes hospitality by framing the reception of refugees as an act of faith and worship, while simultaneously contributing to protection by deploying zakat and aid programs to meet their daily physical needs.

Aside from YKMI, one of the most active Islamic FBOs is Dompét Dhuafa (DD). Based on an interview with DD management staff on 28 March 2025, about 70% of its operational funds come from *zakat*, the redistribution of which is subject to certain criteria. In its profile, DD claims to be a philanthropic organization engaged in empowering people and humanity. In 2015, when more than a thousand Rohingya refugees landed in Aceh, DD made a breakthrough in interpreting the *asnaf* category progressively, so that refugees can be included as *mustahik*. This step reflects DD’s long-term vision, not just in providing charitable assistance but also in equipping refugees with a “hook” so that they can survive and be empowered (Interview with DD management staff, 28 March 2025).

DD began its Rohingya response in 2015 by providing health and education services in Rakhine State, Myanmar. In Aceh, DD has delivered health services since 2018 and provided public kitchen services during emergency phases (Dompét Dhuafa, 2020). To ease post-emergency transitions, DD improves refugee understanding of local sanitation and Indonesian etiquette (Interview with DD field staff, 08 April 2025). Through a Qur’an recitation program coordinated with local leaders and the government, DD teaches refugees about local culture and habits to prevent cultural clashes. However, this engagement faces ongoing challenges due to local resistance against the Rohingya.

Catholic FBOs: Jesuit Refugee Service Indonesia

Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) draws inspiration from Catholic values, rooted in biblical teachings and the Church’s social doctrine (JRS, 2000). According to the Bible, every

human being is created in the image of God (*imago Dei*, Genesis 1:27), possessing an inherent dignity. Guided by Catholic Social Teaching (CST), JRS's mission to accompany, serve, and advocate treats refugees not as objects of assistance but as equal subjects (Interview with JRS field staff, 04 April 2025). This approach views service to refugees not as mere charity, but as a manifestation of faith that demands structural changes to guarantee refugee rights.

After providing emergency responses to Rohingya arrivals in Aceh since 2009, JRS Indonesia began programmatic protection and advocacy work in December 2022. Partnering with the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) through the Protecting Refugees in Asia (PRiA) project, JRS aims to make Aceh more welcoming and prepared for refugees (JRS Indonesia, 2024). Key activities include coordinating refugee protection with local governments and developing contingency plans with humanitarian agencies and NGOs. Additionally, JRS provides emergency relief, delivering food and non-food items within 72 hours of a new arrival.

Hospitality as a virtue: Faith-Based advocacy and refugee protection in Aceh

The virtue of hospitality offers a new lens for discussing the refugee situation in the Global South. In Aceh, this virtue is deeply rooted in local culture, particularly among fishing communities (McNevin and Missbach, 2018; Missbach, 2017), and is closely tied to an Islamic perspective, mirroring how religious ideas of hospitality motivated Muslims in Malaysia to welcome Rohingya refugees (Hoffstaedter, 2017). As a local norm across the Global South, hospitality expands the refugee-protection space outside rigid Global North statutory frameworks, paradoxically increasing protection (El-Taliawi, 2024: 6). Driven by local faith-based communities, hospitality has emerged as a distinct Southern humanitarian approach to displacement, as seen with Syrian refugees in Amman and Karen refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border (Fiddian-Qasmieh and Pacitto, 2019).

The spirit of hospitality has motivated the local Acehnese to bypass state law limitations and accept risks by welcoming Rohingya refugees, encouraging them to “embrace new possibilities, and to negotiate risks and opportunities for the refugee” (McNevin and Missbach, 2018: 309). Our study found that promoting hospitality is central to the FBO approach in Aceh, serving as a counter-narrative to the state's ambivalent legal framework. In Indonesia, the sole refugee regulation, Presidential Regulation No. 125/2016, outlines emergency responses but lacks a fiscal policy for local government funding (Dewansyah and Nafisah, 2021; Kneebone et al., 2021). It also fails to regulate post-emergency care, creating regulatory gaps that severely undermine refugee rights and leave them stranded due to delayed landing permissions. For instance, in November 2023, bureaucratic buck-passing and poor coordination caused 249 Rohingya refugees to be rejected from landing twice in Aceh, despite receiving temporary aid from residents (Antara News, 2023).

In bureaucratic practice, the government sometimes prioritizes legal instruments, such as the Law on Trafficking in Persons (TPPO),⁴ over PR No. 125/2016 on Refugee

Management, which should be the basis of humanitarian response (Interviews with YKMI field staff, 28 April 2025 and JRS management staff, 29 April 2025). With the tendency to use the TPPO law, the government views the arrival of Rohingya refugees as part of a human smuggling industry, focusing on the criminal prosecution of perpetrators and neglecting refugees as victims. This shows that religious messages for hospitality towards refugees face many political challenges in changing the state's normative and defensive approach to refugees.

For example, on 19 November 2023, a truck carrying 35 Rohingya refugees was intercepted in Madat, East Aceh, and the police detained one local resident who was transporting them (Kompas, 2023). The refugees were subsequently placed by the local district government in a sports hall for food and medical assistance. However, after this, the East Aceh Regent's office requested other agencies to take over the management of the refugees because it had limited facilities and resources (Interview with YKMI field staff, 28 April 2025). Because refugees are often viewed as a burden, their protection and trauma recovery are neglected. The government must shift its focus from merely combating human trafficking (TPPO) to prioritizing the human rights, mobility, and dignity of every refugee as a victim needing protection.

Aside from the inadequate and hostile regulations, the conditions of refugee shelters in Aceh have also varied greatly. According to the observations by JRS field staff, not all shelters provide freedom of movement to refugees. Some camps are heavily guarded by security forces, some are loose, and some are more open, allowing interaction with the local community (Interview with JRS field staff, 04 April 2025). Closed camps pose a major challenge because they limit refugees' movements, isolate them from social interaction, and make it difficult for them to access daily necessities, such as markets or other basic services (Interview with YKMI management staff, 06 April 2025). These different treatments are often determined by local policies and community judgment towards refugees. Unfortunately, as mentioned in the previous section, not all experiences with Rohingya refugees leave positive impressions among the host society, and some have even created more stigma and fear.

Beyond providing humanitarian aid, FBOs act as agents of hospitality, urging the state to proactively build equitable protection and integration policies. Alongside other networks, they actively pressure the government through media releases to urgently address the precarious situation of Rohingya refugees. One of the cases raised in a media release was the transfer of 152 refugees by several trucks from South Aceh to Banda Aceh. During the journey, they were not allowed to disembark for almost 48 hours and were without food, potable water, access to toilets, or the opportunity to pray in the mosque. The refugees were brought by truck from *Satpol Pamong Praja* (Civil Service Police Unit) to the Provincial Government in Banda Aceh for a one-night trip. The next day, the refugees were still on the truck and forbidden from disembarking. After waiting all day, the refugees were transferred by truck to the former immigration office in Lhokseumawe. When the truck arrived, there was already a movement of groups rejecting the refugees' arrival with banners and posters. Finally, they could not be accommodated in Lhokseumawe and had to return to South Aceh in the early morning. In the early hours of the morning, there was another group waiting to

reject the refugees (Interview with YKMI field staff, 28 March 2025; see also [KontraS Aceh, 2025](#)). FBOs, together with other humanitarian organizations, issued a Joint Statement that urged the local and central governments to protect and accommodate the Rohingya refugees ([KontraS Aceh, 2025](#)). This advocacy effort resulted in the refugees being accepted back into South Aceh Regency and placed in the South Aceh Regency Sports Hall (GOR) ([Tempo, 2024](#)).

FBOs actively involve religious leaders in voicing support for refugees, realizing that religious legitimacy has a great influence on shaping public opinion. In our study, we found that YKMI and DD utilized the role of religious leaders to issue a *fatwa* (a formal ruling or interpretation on a point of Islamic law) from the Indonesian Ulama Council of Aceh, stating that helping Rohingya refugees is a Muslim obligation (Interview with YKMI field staff, 28 March 2025). This *fatwa* is an important affirmation of Islamic values that uphold compassion, solidarity, and universal justice. In addition, young religious leaders, such as the head of Muhammadiyah Youth Organization, also contributed to building public support by conveying moral messages that Rohingya refugees had to be accommodated in temporary camps, one of which was in South Aceh. The call of the preachers who were involved directly in the field also became an effective bridge in rebuilding public sympathy for the refugees, after months of massively negative narratives against Rohingya refugees through social media. One event that received attention from religious leaders was the landing of Rohingya refugees in South Aceh in late 2024. The field staff of these FBOs recounted the involvement of religious leaders in their efforts to overcome the deadlock in landing negotiations. Initially, the refugees were stuck on the ship, and the authorities did not allow them to land. In addition, there was also a rejection movement among youth groups who came to the place. After dialogue and with the help of a statement from the Muhammadiyah leader, it was agreed that the refugees could be accommodated for a week in Labuhan Haji, South Aceh (Interview with YKMI field staff, 28 March 2025).

YKMI, DD, and JRS Indonesia use religious messages to promote humanitarian values and justice. JRS advocacy staff mentioned that FBOs can act as a bridge between the direct approach (charitable approach), the need-based approach, and the rights-based approach, with the result that FBOs are able to support organizational efforts in policy change. Unlike groups focused solely on advocacy, FBOs build deep trust with refugees through direct presence, enabling them to supply crucial information for structural reform. Their authentically lived faith helps shift societal and policy perspectives, demonstrating that amidst fear and rejection, true faith always stands with the most vulnerable, such as the Rohingya refugees (Interview with JRS management staff, 29 March 2025).

Through advocacy and intervention, FBOs sustain refugees' hope despite regulatory and social pressures. By aligning religious hospitality with the Acehnese local wisdom of *peumulia jamee*, faith transforms into a powerful social force. Rather than just a personal belief, faith provides a moral foundation and social ethics to protect marginalized groups. Ultimately, FBOs leverage religious messages, public education,

and strategic partnerships with religious leaders to ensure Rohingya refugees are assisted with dignity.

The advantage of faith-based networks in promoting hospitality and protection

In the context of the humanitarian response to Rohingya refugees in Aceh, a faith-based approach is a significant strategy in reaching out to communities and building solidarity across parties. FBOs such as YKMI, DD, and JRS Indonesia have shown how to actualize religious values into concrete humanitarian work. They rely not only on material resources but also on the power of religious networks, spiritual values, and moral authority to expand their influence, build trust, and voice justice for refugees. Through collaboration with religious leaders, local communities, and the government, these FBOs demonstrate that faith can be a transformative force in building collective care and bridging diverse interests in handling humanitarian crises.

YKMI, as a local Islamic-based FBO active in Aceh, strategically utilizes its network in humanitarian work. In emergencies, YKMI collaborates across sectors to ensure services are equal and inclusive. They have not only distributed aid but have also been involved in developing an adaptive education curriculum, engaging religious leaders as volunteers, and opening spaces for dialogue that were accepted by local communities (Interview with YKMI field staff, 08 April 2025). YKMI's familiarity with Aceh's traditional and religious values gives it an edge in bridging communication between the government, refugees, and communities. For example, the role of traditional leaders, such as *panglima laot*, provides an entry point for cultural and religious-based approaches. However, YKMI also realizes that the success of humanitarian services is greatly determined by public perception—when local people receive direct benefits (by involving local people as partners in providing food in the kitchen), acceptance increases; conversely, when the form of assistance changes (for example, from food to cash assistance), resistance arises. Therefore, strengthening faith networks and local values continues to be a priority in their humanitarian strategy.

DD, as one of the official *zakat* institutions in Indonesia, has also demonstrated the effectiveness of utilizing religious networks in humanitarian work. Although DD follows the prevailing national regulations, they have faced great challenges in coordination, especially since refugees are scattered in various locations with different local policies. In Aceh, refugees were once spread across five districts, each of which required different advocacy processes and approaches. According to DD management staff, this situation made long-term program placement difficult due to the uncertainty of location and the sustainability of the response (Interview with DD management staff, 28 March 2025). However, with funding from *zakat*, as well as a progressive understanding of its redistribution, DD was still able to respond both in the emergency and post-emergency phases, especially in the aspects of health and additional nutrition. DD also encourages the integration of refugees into local schools and develops empowerment programs, such as skills training courses, to strengthen their economic

capacity. DD's network of relationships and credibility as a religious institution has allowed it to build extensive collaborations and be accepted in many walks of life.

Despite this, the narrative used by Islamic FBOs has also faced resistance from some communities due to the proliferation of negative narratives concerning Rohingya refugees. Some of these negative narratives were articulated by police officials using judgmental religious undertones and broad generalizations (see [Detik, 2023](#)), and they were spread through online media. For instance, one media outlet conveyed an interview with several police officials regarding the reasons for local rejection of the Rohingya refugees, citing factors such as: Wasting aid or being ungrateful, escaping from refugee camps, disregarding Islamic Sharia and Acehese local customs, and raping minors ([Detik, 2023](#)). This narrative, which does not fully reflect reality, was continually voiced during the refugees' arrival, creating a presumed general image of all Rohingya refugees. It eroded the solidarity of some Acehese residents who had previously viewed Rohingya refugees as *mustahik* deserving of *zakat*, a perspective that DD and YKMI had actively championed. The FBOs have counteracted these negative narratives by strategically prioritizing consistent advocacy and public education, prudently conducted through partnerships with trusted local and religious leaders, to rebuild solidarity and firmly reassert the foundational religious values of compassion against online disinformation.

Meanwhile, JRS Indonesia faces a unique challenge that distinguishes it from the FBOs. As a Catholic-based organization operating in Aceh—the only province in Indonesia that implements *Sharia* law—it must navigate its work with particular care to fulfill its humanitarian mission while avoiding any perception of promoting missionary activities or Christianization. The JRS emphasizes inclusivity grounded in its belief in the inherent dignity that all people are God's children, regardless of their faiths or beliefs. Thus, JRS can maintain the principle of neutrality or an anti-discriminatory position in serving refugees. For JRS, faith networks are not only a mobilization tool but also a mirror of moral and spiritual commitment to human dignity. Every relationship built on the recognition of the *imago Dei* (image of God) in refugees will encourage a humanist, relational, and empathetic approach to service. With these principles, JRS builds interfaith collaboration in Aceh by mingling with Islamic organizations and religious leaders who are in dialogue with citizens and the government (Interview with JRS field staff, 04 April 2025). JRS plays a role in consolidating many NGOs and community groups in Aceh to develop and coordinate service and advocacy schemes. On many occasions, together with other NGOs and CSOs, both faith-based and secular, JRS works behind the scenes to draft media releases and policy briefs that are submitted to the government to advocate for Rohingya refugees to be treated humanely.

It is worth noting that as a Catholic-based organization operating in Aceh, an area with a strong Muslim character, JRS Indonesia emphasizes its identity as a humanitarian organization grounded in universal values rather than highlighting its Catholic affiliation (Interview with JRS field staff, 04 April 2025). JRS Indonesia, which had previously worked in Aceh both before and after the tsunami, is driven by the conviction that there is no contradiction between humanitarian principles and Catholic

Social Teachings. Both are mutually reinforcing and inspiring. JRS staff also come from diverse religious and belief backgrounds. This diversity has facilitated JRS Indonesia's advocacy work—particularly because its field officer for advocacy and protection in Aceh is a Muslim and a native of the region. Nevertheless, JRS Indonesia intentionally limits the use of its identity as a Catholic-based organization in public spaces where there is a perceived risk of misunderstanding. In earlier periods, particularly when working with internally displaced persons affected by social conflict during Aceh's status as a Military Operations Area due to the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), and during the post-2004 tsunami response, JRS was commonly known as "Jaringan Relawan Sosial" (Social Volunteer Network), rather than by its official international name.

Between faith and neutrality: Limits and ambivalences of FBOs

The involvement of FBOs in responding to the arrival of Rohingya refugees in Aceh has been essential in bridging humanitarian gaps left by the state and international agencies. Their theological and ethical orientations—whether rooted in Islamic principles of *rahmatan lil-'alamin* or the Catholic teaching of *imago Dei* and its CST documents—provide both legitimacy and motivation for humanitarian action. Religious narratives allow FBOs to frame refugee assistance not merely as a charitable endeavor but as an obligation of faith and a moral imperative as well. This grounding is especially significant in Aceh, where religion and customary law (*hukum adat*) are closely related and rooted in the cultural perspectives adopted by local communities (McNevin and Missbach, 2018). Yet, while religious motivations have proven powerful in mobilizing solidarity and resources, they also raise limitations and ambivalences that require critical scrutiny.

In the humanitarian world, FBOs are often important actors in responding to crises, including in refugee management, both as partners with UN agencies and NGOs and as development partners. However, their existence is not free from the challenge of balancing their religious identity with the principles of humanitarian neutrality. On the one hand, religious values are a strong source of inspiration for defending human rights and dignity; however, on the other hand, FBOs also face concerns about possible partisanship, exclusivity, or sectarian bias (see, e.g., McCarthy, 2017).

Beyond theological ambivalence, FBOs are also constrained by structural and operational factors. For instance, YKMI's services to Rohingya refugees in Aceh are heavily dependent on funding from the UNHCR, positioning the organization more as an implementing partner than an independent actor. Such dependency can limit its capacity to fully embody a faith-inspired approach, as it must conform to donor requirements and humanitarian bureaucratic frameworks. In this case, faith-based distinctiveness risks becoming "instrumentalized," functioning primarily as a means of mobilizing community resources rather than fundamentally reshaping the dominant humanitarian paradigm. These tensions underscore the need to view FBOs not as static embodiments of religious ideals but as actors negotiating between faith

commitments, humanitarian principles, and political realities. Recognizing their contributions and limitations allows for a more nuanced understanding of how religion operates in humanitarian contexts and how FBOs can be supported to sustain principled yet contextually adaptive engagement with refugee populations (see [Ager and Ager, 2015](#); [Barnett and Stein, 2012](#)).

Final remarks

In the fraught landscape of refugee response in Aceh, FBOs like YKMI, DD, and JRS Indonesia demonstrate that religious conviction can serve as a powerful moral and social force. Beyond delivering humanitarian assistance, these organizations bridge gaps between state institutions, local communities, and displaced populations by fostering solidarity and hospitality amidst exclusion. Their religious narratives mobilize resources and offer a vital counter-discourse to fear and rejection, advocating for the dignity and rights of Rohingya refugees. Ultimately, amidst legal ambiguity and shifting political will, the strategic engagement of FBOs reaffirms the potential of faith—as both an ethical compass and social praxis—to uphold human dignity in times of crisis.

Critical appraisal reveals that the religious foundations of FBOs act as both an asset and a constraint. While theological narratives like *imago Dei* or *rahmatan lil-'alamin* legitimize humanitarian action, they can also produce fragile forms of hospitality, as seen in recent local resistance to the Rohingya in Aceh when communities perceive refugees as resource burdens. Moreover, FBO religious identity requires constant negotiation: JRS must operate cautiously in a strongly Islamic environment by downplaying its Catholic affiliation, while Islamic FBOs like YKMI and DD enjoy greater local legitimacy but face theological debates over extending zakat funds to non-Muslims.

Without systemic advocacy and interfaith collaboration, FBO interventions risk reinforcing a precarious hospitality that relies on community goodwill rather than enforceable rights. Nonetheless, advocacy to promote Rohingya acceptance in Aceh remains a collaborative effort involving secular NGOs, faith-based organizations, and local leaders who leverage Islamic moral values to sustain hospitality. Notably, even secular human rights organizations, such as KontraS Aceh, often draw upon religious discourse to frame their advocacy.

FBOs aligned with the dominant local faith enjoy greater latitude in promoting refugee acceptance, while organizations like JRS must operate discreetly to avoid suspicion of proselytization. These variations underscore both the opportunities and limits of faith-based humanitarianism in Aceh. Ultimately, while FBOs cannot replace state responsibility, their ability to mobilize ethical narratives, community solidarity, and practical resources makes them indispensable. The challenge ahead lies in ensuring their religiously motivated engagement moves beyond conditional hospitality to help build rights-based, sustainable refugee-protection frameworks in Indonesia.

This study was limited by its exclusive reliance on interviews with staff from only three FBOs, focusing solely on their perspectives while excluding local and national

governments, CSOs, secular NGOs, religious leaders, and refugees. Future research should involve non-faith or secular organizations to obtain more comprehensive findings. Crucially, studies should shift focus from emergency relief to the role of FBOs in long-term integration, assessing the sustainability of religiously motivated hospitality and its contribution to durable, rights-based protection frameworks in Indonesia.

In conclusion, the indispensable role of FBOs in Aceh lies not only in providing humanitarian aid but in using the moral authority of religious ethics to sustain fragile community hospitality, challenge state inaction, and advocate for the human dignity of Rohingya refugees.

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Notes

1. Based on an interview with a Rohingya family in the shelter of Mina Raya, Pidie, Aceh, 25 May 2023.
2. Based on an interview with Faisal, an individual Rohingya refugee currently staying in Lhokseumawe, who is assisting the UNHCR and other organizations as an interpreter for the Rohingya community, 15 March 2024.
3. One of them is the 2018 Circular Letter of the Director General of Immigration, which emphasizes a non-detention approach to refugees in line with human rights principles and as a

supplement to PR 125/2016. In addition, Indonesia also refers to Law No. 39 of 1999 on Human Rights, which recognizes the right of every person to seek asylum in order to obtain political protection.

4. See: Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 21 Tahun 2007 tentang Pemberantasan Tindak Pidana Perdagangan Orang (Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 21 of 2007 Concerning the Eradication of the Criminal Act of Human Trafficking). Available at: <https://peraturan.bpk.go.id/Details/39849/uu-no-21-tahun-2007> [In Indonesian].

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