

The Evolving of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): A Comparison Between International and Malaysia on Humanitarian Aid for Refugees

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Abstract

Historically, NGOs addressing refugee issues have focused primarily on meeting immediate needs like food, water, and shelter. However, as refugee populations grow and face increasingly complex challenges, NGOs are now required to adopt a more holistic approach to humanitarian aid. This shift prompts the question: to what extent can NGOs evolve their roles to meet these expanding demands? This conceptual study examines the historical evolution of NGOs in the humanitarian sector, focusing on how their roles have expanded beyond fulfilling refugees' basic needs to offering more comprehensive support. This historical perspective highlights that while NGOs initially prioritized basic survival needs, they now address a broader spectrum of challenges, such as trauma recovery, community rebuilding, and sustainable livelihood development. We conclude that to meet the demands of modern refugee aid, NGOs must adopt a more holistic, flexible approach, fostering collaborations with governments and the private sector. This expanded role reflects the growing complexity of refugee issues and underscores the need for NGOs to reimagine their strategies within an increasingly interconnected humanitarian landscape.

Keywords: Humanitarian Aid; NGOs; Refugees; Refugees in Malaysia; Evolution.

INTRODUCTION

This study delves into the transitions and evolution of the role of NGOs involved in humanitarian aid for refugees. It examines how the historical focus of NGOs, which initially centered on fulfilling basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, has expanded into a more holistic approach. NGOs now emphasize capacity building, aiming to improve the overall quality of life, including education, healthcare, and economic development for refugees. Consequently, NGOs are increasingly seen as vital in empowering refugees to live better lives and achieve greater sustainability.¹ At a certain level, NGOs have even created political pressure on states to respect human rights and have mobilized greater public involvement in implementing all aspects of human rights.² This shift has revealed a significant gap in the literature: how NGOs have historically adapted and must continue to adapt their missions and

methodologies in response to these escalating demands, particularly in countries like Malaysia, where refugees often rely more on NGOs than on state support.

Given the evolving global context, where war persists in different settings and circumstances, this study seeks to contextualize the significance of humanitarian aid in addressing the growing number of refugees in countries offering temporary protection. Much of this aid is led by NGOs, aligning with their core mission and responsibilities in managing refugee populations. We address this gap by examining the historical trajectory of humanitarian NGOs and their evolving approach to aid to offer more comprehensive support; this paper contextualizes the importance of adapting NGO roles to meet not only basic needs but also complex, holistic demands. Building on Nazri et al.'s³ argument on humanitarian aid, which stated that *"it is time for Malaysian NGOs to undergo an organizational transformation to expand their endeavors to provide more holistic support for refugee communities,"* we acknowledge that many refugees in Malaysia are more reliant on NGOs than the state. We also question what Malaysia can learn from international experiences in transforming and expanding its aid to refugees.

This conceptual study, grounded in secondary data, presents an in-depth discussion on a key issue: to what extent can NGOs evolve beyond solely meeting basic needs? We begin by exploring the history of humanitarian-based NGOs. To connect this to the role of NGOs in assisting refugees, we provide an overview of the historical events leading to the presence of refugees both internationally and in Malaysia. We then attempt to understand this evolution by comparing international NGOs and local NGOs in Malaysia in their efforts to address refugee issues. This shift is also influenced by the current policies of the host countries, but as independent entities, NGOs can transcend existing systemic limitations in the name of humanity. We argue that the role of NGOs in humanitarian aid must be reconceptualized, as their function has evolved beyond merely meeting basic needs; it now encompasses urgent considerations in the context of technology and contemporary developments. We believe the findings from this study have the potential to offer new perspectives on the role and definition of NGOs in providing more holistic aid, especially in addressing the complex challenges faced by refugees.

THE HISTORY OF NGOS AND HUMANITARIAN NGOS

This historical trajectory shows the evolving importance of NGOs in international frameworks and highlights their role in filling gaps left by state-based approaches. The role and contributions of NGOs have become increasingly significant in improving human conditions, earning recognition for their involvement in conflict resolution through advocacy and operational services.⁴ This aligns with the critique by Kartini et al.⁵, who argue that a contributing factor to the large number of displaced persons worldwide is the failure of the United Nations, as an international peacekeeping agency, to protect and support conflict victims effectively. Between 1900 and 1945, official U.S. and European documents were examined to trace the first use of the term NGO. However, it was found in a U.S. official document from 1942, series number three, titled "Non-Governmental Information Resources in National Defense" under the section "Education and National Defense." The second document in the same series was also studied to investigate the usage of the term "non-governmental." Based on this investigation, the document seems to represent the first official U.S. publication that distinguished between government and NGOs, although no technical definition was provided. In 1942, the distinction between non-governmental and non-profit agencies was identified. The United Nations (UN) was the first international institution to introduce the term NGO formally. The UN recognized the need for these organizations to establish communication channels with entities not part of the government through the

Economic and Social Council, one of the six main bodies of the UN. This necessity was stated in Article 71 of the UN Charter and the Statute of the International Court of Justice, signed on June 26, 1945.⁶

On October 7, 1944, representatives from the United States, China, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union held a special meeting at Dumbarton Oaks, resulting in a proposal based on the UN Charter. Chapter XI, titled "Arrangements for International Economic and Social Cooperation," Section C, "Functions and Powers of the Economic and Social Council," was included in the proposal, later incorporated into Article 71 of the UN Charter. The connection between Article 71 of the UN Charter and Section C of Chapter XI in the Dumbarton Oaks proposal (1944) is an important historical moment, marking the first official use of the term NGO.⁷ It set a foundational precedent for recognizing and integrating NGOs within international governance frameworks. This historical acknowledgement underpins the evolving role of NGOs as crucial actors in global humanitarian efforts, shaping their legitimacy, responsibilities, and authority in addressing complex issues like refugee aid- response would establish why this historical moment is important in the broader context of NGO development and their expanding roles.

Scholars have differing views on identifying the first NGO established globally. Skjelsbaek⁸ suggests that the Rosicrucian Order, founded in 1694, was the earliest NGO, creating a unique phenomenon that lasted nearly a century and a half. However, Charnovitz⁹ argues that NGOs emerged even before 1775, though at that time, their involvement primarily focused on shaping national policy. The Roman Catholic Church is considered one of the earliest international NGOs, established in 1775, playing an active role. In the same year, the Pennsylvania Society was founded to promote the abolition of slavery. By 1787, British citizens began forming associations to abolish the slave trade. Between 1775 and 1842, these associations were primarily focused on ending the system of slavery. NGOs oriented toward peace emerged around 1815, such as The American Peace Society (1828) and the International Peace Congress (1849).

In 1866, the Union Peace Universal, a peace association, was formed, eventually significantly influencing international organizations and law. By 1990, nearly 425 peace associations existed worldwide. Around this time, NGOs advocating for workers' rights also emerged. The earliest international workers' meeting took place in 1864, leading to the establishment of the International Working Men's Association. Transnational worker activities grew by 1870, likely due to improvements in transportation and communication. The first transnational labor union, the International Federation of Tobacco Workers, was founded in 1876. Between 1838 and 1846, the Anti-Corn Law League campaigned against British protectionism and promoted free trade. In 1846, two free trade NGOs were founded: the Free Trade Association and the Belgian Association for Commercial Liberty. NGOs also play a role in enforcing international law. The Institute of International Law was founded in 1873 to introduce international arbitration and conclude many vital agreements. The International Law Association was established in 1873 to codify international law, particularly private maritime law.

Meanwhile, the York-Antwerp organization was founded in 1890 to help formulate laws. In 1897, the Association of International Law was established in Japan to study and disseminate knowledge of international law. The American Society of International Law was founded in 1906 to promote the study of international law and foster international relations based on law and justice.¹⁰ This shift illustrates the essential function NGOs now serve within international governance, acting as advocacy groups and operational partners to enhance human security and provide essential services in areas where governmental efforts may be insufficient.

The Rise of Humanitarian NGOs in Response to Conflict and Crisis

Most humanitarian organizations were not established to address climate change or natural disasters but to respond to humanitarian emergencies arising from violent conflicts and wars.¹¹ Movements such as Greenpeace, Earth Justice, and the Rainforest Action Network contain humanitarian elements; however, these NGOs primarily focus on environmental causes and are not involved in conflict-related humanitarian crises. Humanitarianism studies human experiences by examining what can happen to individuals and what they can do through thinking, feeling, and speaking.¹² Humanitarianism can be manifested through various approaches, one of which is providing humanitarian aid. The act of assisting those in need has existed throughout the history of human civilization.¹³ The primary goal of humanitarian intervention is to reduce the loss of life and ensure the continuation of life by offering aid to those in need.

Since the UN World Conference in Vienna in 1993, humanitarian-oriented NGOs have been officially allowed to participate in discussions, present their agendas, collaborate with governments, and share reports on human rights issues.¹⁴ The origins of international humanitarian aid can be traced back to June 1859, when Henry Dunant, a businessman and social activist, assisted the wounded victims of the Battle of Solferino.¹⁵ Dunant was shocked by the neglect of the injured, leading him to write *Memories of Solferino* in 1862. In the book, Dunant expressed his outrage at the neglect of the war victims and condemned the lack of aid for those affected by the battle. This experience eventually led to establishing the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), with its first international meeting held on February 17, 1863, in Geneva.¹⁶ Later, in 1919, Eglantyne Jebb founded the Save the Children Fund following the trauma of World War I. In 1942, the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (Oxfam) was founded to provide food aid to those suffering from famine caused by the Greek Civil War. After World War II, the NGO CARE was established in 1946, initially focusing on sending food supplies from the United States to Europe.¹⁷

In Asia, the rise of NGOs began due to programs initiated by the United Nations to provide aid after World War II. The Philippines was one of the first countries to establish an NGO in 1950. Following this, countries like Malaysia, India, Bangladesh, and Thailand followed in the footsteps of the Philippines.¹⁸ However, Olivo's writings do not mention the names of the first NGOs established in these countries.

THE HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL AND MALAYSIA'S REFUGEES

Humanitarian aid NGOs provide to recipients can be categorized according to different groups, including victims of natural disasters, poverty, famine, orphans, the elderly, the homeless, and, notably, refugees. The international history of refugee crises dates back to the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, followed by the Caucasus Wars of 1918–1921 and the Greco-Turkish War of 1919–1922.¹⁹ World War II forced millions of people to flee Europe and Africa, while the 1948 Arab-Israeli War displaced millions of Palestinians. The Cold War and the rise of Soviet regimes drove many to escape communist oppression. Decolonization in Africa and Southeast Asia during the 1960s and 1970s resulted in tens of millions of additional refugees. In the 1980s, civil unrest in Central America and Haiti forced many to flee their homes. The 1990s saw the Balkan crisis and the breakdown of public order in numerous African countries, again displacing millions. Over the span of 25 years, the Afghan crisis also displaced millions of Afghans to neighboring countries.²⁰

By 2020, the number of refugees increased sharply due to ongoing humanitarian crises in various regions, particularly the Syrian civil war, the denial of Rohingya citizenship in Myanmar, and the Saudi-Yemeni conflict. In Malaysia, the country has historically been a

preferred destination for refugees, starting with the Vietnam War and following the humanitarian crises in Bosnia, Myanmar, and Palestine. Today, Malaysia continues to serve as a transit country for refugees from diverse ethnic backgrounds and nationalities, including Syrians, Yemenis, Pakistanis, Afghans, Sri Lankans, and others. These refugees view Malaysia as a welcoming destination for migrants, making it an appealing target. Malaysia's tolerance policy, which involves accepting refugees and facilitating their resettlement to third countries, has contributed to the annual increase in their numbers.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: NGO, HUMANITARIAN AID, AND REFUGEE

Around the 1990s, there was a significant increase in the number of NGOs operating in national development. Initially starting as minor actors, NGOs have since expanded considerably, particularly as providers of financial resources and volunteers. As a result, NGOs have become key players in the national development process, supporting communities through the resources and institutional support they have garnered. Their evolution into vital development actors underscores their growing influence in shaping policies and delivering essential services, filling gaps left by government institutions.²¹ NGOs have always been at the forefront of defending human rights, championing global campaigns for a wide range of rights, including civil rights, women's and children's rights, and personal safety.²² NGOs are registered organizations, community groups, professional associations, trade unions, and charitable organizations aimed at improving the well-being of their members in the specific areas in which they operate.²³ The concept of NGOs is rooted not in nation-states but in specific groups, individuals, and the collective strength of communities. The laws of nation-states do not bind these groups.²⁴ When referring to NGOs, it "simultaneously implies a 'non-profit' orientation,"²⁵ highlighting that these organizations are inherently non-profit, which is why many NGOs are established with a strong emphasis on volunteerism.²⁶ Their non-profit nature allows them to focus on addressing social, humanitarian, and development issues without the constraints of commercial or state interests, further emphasizing their role in fostering community-driven solutions.

Kanbur²⁷ provides a detailed categorization of NGOs into two main groups: operational and advocacy. Kamat's²⁸ research identifies operational NGOs as organizations that carry out activities to assist communities and regions in need of humanitarian aid. Most operational NGOs engage in various activities, typically providing social services such as clean water supplies, healthcare services, and educational programs.²⁹ The second type, advocacy NGOs, focuses on influencing government or corporate policies to align with their aspirations. Advocacy NGOs possess the capacity to shape the lives of many people by impacting the policies that are created.³⁰ Jordan and Tuijl³¹ emphasize that the primary goal of advocacy NGOs is to play a crucial role in correcting power imbalances. These NGOs aim to address structural inequalities by influencing policies and creating societal change, often engaging in campaigns or lobbying efforts to amplify the voices of marginalized communities and bring about reform in governance or corporate behavior.

This study has untangled NGOs that carry out humanitarian aid activities. We define humanitarian aid as conceptualized by Hammerstad³², which refers to assistance provided to victims of sudden, natural, or man-made disasters, such as floods, famine, or wars. Humanitarian aid is often called emergency aid, highlighting its short-term goal and immediate impact in saving lives and alleviating suffering. This contrasts with long-term objectives, such as development aid. The term "complex emergency" underscores the specific challenges of addressing humanitarian crises amidst war or large-scale political violence. Humanitarian aid responses often involve political, military, and external actors working in concert to halt violence, providing relief and stabilizing interventions to manage the crisis.

Typically, humanitarian NGOs are among the first actors to respond to situations where there are significant violations of human rights and humanitarian law.³³ NGOs are responsible for gathering information from various sources, including victims, witnesses, injury assessments, data from other NGOs, media reports, and ongoing demonstrations. Additionally, NGOs play a critical role in raising awareness among the public, governments, international entities, and other actors regarding humanitarian issues by collecting and disseminating pertinent information.³⁴ In general, NGOs provide extensive assistance and take various forms, including immediate aid and long-term development support.³⁵ Beamon dan Balcik³⁶ outlines the involvement of human rights NGOs in two types of activities:

i. Emergency Assistance Activities: These activities focus on aiding victims of large-scale emergencies, characterized by short-term efforts to deliver health services and ensure survival.

ii. Development Activities: These refer to long-term assistance promoting self-sufficiency and sustainability, which may include constructing permanent facilities.

Scholars acknowledge the crucial role of NGOs in responding to humanitarian issues, as highlighted by Schwartz ³⁷ : "*...(NGOs) play an important role in the governance of international humanitarian response as implementing partners to governments and international organizations, as advocates, and as critics...*" To a certain extent, humanitarian NGOs are viewed as peacebuilders, as stated by Schloms³⁸ : "*...humanitarian NGOs have to play a peace-building role...*".

We draw the connection between humanitarian NGOs and refugees to examine the significance of the assistance provided to this group, where the role of NGOs becomes highly critical. In many situations, refugees worldwide rely more on NGOs than the host or transit country governments. NGOs are often perceived as more responsive and understanding of their needs than governments, frequently hindered by bureaucratic, political, or resource constraints. Refugees often feel safer and more secure when engaging with NGOs, as they perceive these organizations to understand better their demands, struggles, and the trauma they have endured and to respond more swiftly. Additionally, humanitarian NGOs approach refugee issues more progressively, addressing both the physical and emotional needs of refugees, in contrast to governments or international organizations that may lack the capacity or willingness to provide timely and practical aid.

Refugees are individuals who flee from their place of origin to another location due to insecurity, seeking protection. However, even in their new location, which is supposedly safer, they often face detention, persecution, and deportation as authorities arbitrarily harass, detain, and arrest them. They are frequently vulnerable to becoming victims of human trafficking for purposes such as forced labor, sexual exploitation, and child marriage. Nonetheless, their issues are often centered around basic needs—lack of food, shelter, education, and adequate healthcare. In more severe situations, they become targets of extreme discrimination and hatred from the local community, which alienates them from their fundamental human rights. By examining Malaysia's context as a transit country, we aim to conceptualize the transit as a first place of hope for refugees while acknowledging that they often experience a lack of security guarantees during their transit stay and the overlooked stories and uncertain futures they face.³⁹ The safety of refugees is frequently threatened, encompassing various components of human security.

Moreover, the failure of legal frameworks to protect refugees' rights against discrimination further exacerbates the already difficult circumstances they face. Despite these challenges, the influx of vulnerable groups into Malaysia from abroad continues to rise. This situation raises the critical question: what is next for humanitarian NGOs moving forward, given the current refugee circumstances and the urgent needs they face in times of crisis?

FINDINGS

Our findings discuss the historical evolution of NGOs in the humanitarian sector, emphasizing how their roles have expanded from merely addressing refugees' basic needs to offering more comprehensive support. We begin by examining the significant role of NGOs in providing humanitarian aid to refugees in various countries, particularly Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Europe. Next, we explore how NGOs assist refugees in Malaysia. While NGOs are crucial in delivering humanitarian aid internationally and in Malaysia, critical gaps in their approaches must be addressed to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of their support efforts.

How is Aid for Refugees in Internationally?

This section examines the involvement of NGOs in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and European countries that have received large waves of refugees. Among these, Turkey is significantly impacted by the influx of refugees and has been at the forefront of advocating for human rights through the roles played by its NGOs. The role of NGOs in Turkey, particularly in aiding Syrian refugees, includes providing services such as food and clothing; however, these supplies remain insufficient. Additionally, they play a significant role in the health sector by providing medication for patients. Furthermore, NGOs are involved in education, establishing learning centers for Syrian refugee children and supplying volunteer teachers.⁴⁰ A closer look at the role of Islamic-based NGOs in areas with high Syrian populations, such as Hatay, Istanbul, Adana, Sanliurfa, and Gaziantep, highlights their educational efforts in 2016. Although education for Syrian refugees was provided by NGOs, since September 16, 2013, it has been fully controlled by Turkey's Ministry of Education, both within and outside refugee camps. The NGOs' goal in educating Syrian refugees is to equip them with knowledge to help improve their skills, enhance their quality of life, and build bridges between Syria and Turkey through joint programs with Turkish students.

The role of humanitarian NGOs in Turkey's education sector can be summarized as follows: 1) construction of temporary education centers, 2) renovation and upgrading of schools, 3) providing teacher salary incentives, 4) developing, publishing, and distributing educational materials, 5) financial support for families, 6) offering Turkish language courses and vocational training, and 7) providing transportation for students.⁴¹ Turkey's NGOs have also helped shelter newly arrived refugees from the border. In one example, a local Turkish NGO converted a wedding hall into temporary housing, where families received daily supplies such as food, hygiene products, and baby milk.⁴²

However, there has been criticism of the role of NGOs in Turkey. Humanitarian efforts in Turkey have primarily ignored employment programs within their aid and social policy initiatives. While NGOs focus on vocational training, the reality is that securing employment for Syrian refugees in Turkey remains a critical issue.⁴³ Furthermore, NGOs have been found to have their interests when conducting humanitarian activities. A study by Mostafa (2015)⁴⁴ attempted to outline the challenges of providing mental health care for Syrian refugees, revealing that while NGOs had established a medical clinic for Syrian refugees in Kilis, the available medications were insufficient. Mostafa also highlighted how NGOs selectively choose locations for their operations to ease logistical work, often ignoring areas with more significant needs.

In Jordan, most aid programs NGOs offer include food, water, health services, and gender-based violence awareness programs. Other NGO initiatives include homeschooling, business consultations, and housing construction with essential supplies such as blankets, stoves, fuel, and baby diapers. However, many NGO missions focus on short-term aid distribution rather than long-term economic development.⁴⁵ In addition to addressing the basic

needs of food, health, and education, NGOs in Jordan also assist refugee women who experience sexual harassment. NGOs are responsible for reporting sexual harassment cases because many women are afraid to file reports unless they can trust the individuals involved. NGOs also create awareness programs about sexual harassment among refugee women.⁴⁶ Some NGOs in Jordan also handle abortion services for women raped during wartime, ensuring access to safe abortion care for those with unwanted pregnancies, which safeguards women's health and human rights.⁴⁷

Beyond Turkey and Jordan, Lebanon has also faced a significant influx of refugees. Palestinian NGOs in Lebanon focus on advocacy, mainly fighting for the rights of Palestinian refugees, which has influenced Lebanese government policies and decisions.⁴⁸ In Europe, the refugee crisis, especially since 2015, has raised concerns and led to the establishment of various social movements offering active aid, including medical care.⁴⁹ NGOs also play a vital role in using social media to raise public awareness of refugee issues, with media as the primary platform for spreading information.⁵⁰ For instance, Palestinians in Aida Refugee Camp have lived under Israeli military occupation for over 50 years. While refugees struggle with issues such as the separation wall, unemployment, military violence, and high incarceration rates, they also face water shortages. This crisis inspired a Palestinian NGO worker at Aida to create a documentary in 2011 called *Everyday Nakba*, highlighting Palestinian refugees' struggles with water scarcity, a legacy of the 1948 displacement. The documentary led to subtle political changes and minor improvements in the refugees' quality of life.⁵¹

NGOs also have a strong legal presence in assisting refugees, particularly when authorities detain them. Two NGOs, *Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana (ARCI)* and *Emergency*, have played vital roles in assisting refugees in Italy. ARCI provides legal assistance to refugees caught by law enforcement. For those still seeking asylum, securing their release from police custody can be difficult, but for those classified as "witnesses," ARCI lawyers contact judges to expedite their cases. However, ARCI's efforts sometimes fail when judges lack sympathy, leaving refugees trapped in Umberto, Italy. Meanwhile, *Emergency* offers medical services to refugees injured while crossing the Mediterranean Sea. As private donations entirely fund *Emergency*, it faces significant financial difficulties, forcing it to focus more on fundraising than on its operations.⁵²

NGO participation in legal issues is also evident among refugees in Israel. Many refugees are denied asylum, are not deported, but instead are held in detention or restricted from settling, leading many to prefer returning to their home countries despite the dangers they face. When a refugee is detained, humanitarian organizations face two undesirable choices: either help release them only to be deported to an unsafe homeland or refuse assistance, forcing them to remain in detention in Israel. By April 2012, nearly 1,200 South Sudanese refugees had returned to their home countries, largely due to NGO support.⁵³ The role of NGOs extends to managing refugee arrivals along the Mediterranean Sea, where over 350,000 migrants had arrived by December 2016, with continued migration via the central Mediterranean route. Conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria have driven many people to seek refuge, and one route involves crossing the Mediterranean by boat to reach Europe.⁵⁴

Further discussions on NGO involvement in assisting refugees stranded at sea, including asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, reveal an increase in NGO participation following the tragic death of Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian child who drowned on the Mediterranean coast in an attempt to flee Syria with his family by boat. NGOs sponsored search and rescue boats for over a year, increasing their contributions to refugee support. NGOs play a crucial role in saving the lives of asylum seekers on land and in international waters. However, their work depends on government cooperation and remains bound by legal frameworks. NGOs tend to emphasize life-saving goals over broader advocacy for refugee and migrant rights.⁵⁵

How is Aid for Refugees in Malaysia?

The challenges faced by refugees in Malaysia have drawn attention from various stakeholders, particularly the government and NGOs. In the case of Vietnamese refugees, the Malaysian government, along with several organizations, developed Pulau Bidong as a settlement for Vietnamese refugees. The island had longhouses, a hospital, clinics, temples, churches, a post office, vocational schools, and shops, all available for the refugees' use. In contrast, for Syrian refugees, the researchers highlight the involvement of the Malaysian Social Research Institute (MSRI), which had previously assisted Afghan and Somali refugees and is now also involved in aiding Syrian refugees. The NGO has received special funding from UNHCR for its refugee operations and has launched a special fund through the "Syrian Refugee Humanitarian Fund" in collaboration with nine NGOs, including MyCARE, Syria Care Malaysia, MAHAR, ABIM, and the IMAM Response and Relief Team (IMARET). However, in the cases of Bosnian and Rohingya refugees, the researcher did not comprehensively mention the involvement of NGOs in assisting these refugees and only described how the Malaysian government managed their situation.⁵⁶

In Malaysia, one of the top NGOs that is particularly attentive to the lives of refugees is Humanitarian Care Malaysia (MyCARE). The assistance provided includes financial aid for living expenses, food packages, healthcare, formal education, counseling, self-skill training, and sacrificial animal offerings (ibadah korban). However, the study criticizes the focus on basic needs alone, arguing that this is insufficient. Based on the discussion of refugee-related issues in the study, other pressing needs must also be addressed.⁵⁷ Also, Human Aid Selangor and Malaysia Life Line for Syria (MLLFS) have significantly improved the lives of refugees in Malaysia. Human Aid Selangor provides housing and healthcare services and has established a learning center (PPA) to ensure that Rohingya and Burmese Muslim children receive an education. While Human Aid Selangor has stated that it does not have formal cooperation with UNHCR, it has received a certificate of appreciation from UNHCR for protecting Rohingya refugees. Meanwhile, MLLFS focuses on education and healthcare, specifically for Syrian, Palestinian, and Yemeni refugees in Malaysia. Several of MLLFS's projects and programs are carried out closely with the Malaysian government, UNHCR, and other NGOs, particularly in special programs to assist Syrian refugees.⁵⁸ In Malaysia, one of the NGOs that is particularly attentive to the lives of refugees is MyCare. The assistance provided includes financial aid for living expenses, food packages, healthcare, formal education, counseling, self-skill training, and sacrificial animal offerings (ibadah korban). However, the study criticizes the focus on basic needs alone, arguing that this is insufficient. Based on the discussion of refugee-related issues in the study, other pressing needs must also be addressed.

Meanwhile, Nazri et al. identify Cinta Syria Malaysia (CSM) as an entity that has significantly contributed to supporting Syrian refugees in Malaysia, particularly in education. The NGO established a school for Syrian refugee children in Bandar Seri Puteri, Bangi, Selangor. Additionally, CSM provides financial assistance and food packages to families in need. The researchers also criticized the involvement of Malaysian NGOs for focusing more on assisting refugees abroad rather than those within Malaysia, despite the many refugees living in poverty locally who are in dire need of help.

Nazri et al.⁵⁹ criticize most Malaysian NGOs for focusing primarily on basic needs rather than addressing what refugees genuinely require. Their study suggests that NGOs could and should provide several key types of aid to refugee communities in Malaysia: (1) complaint channels, (2) temporary shelter, (3) legal aid, (4) psychological healthcare, and (5) language classes. These five areas are interrelated; for example, language proficiency is necessary for refugees to file complaints and access legal and mental healthcare services. The ability to

effectively use complaint channels is crucial when refugees face oppression or detention by the police or other authorities.

DISCUSSION

Both contexts highlight NGOs' critical role in providing immediate, life-saving aid when comparing international and local NGOs in Malaysia. However, while international NGOs in countries like Turkey and Jordan have increasingly moved towards incorporating educational and vocational programs into their humanitarian efforts, Malaysian NGOs focus more on providing essential services due to the state's absence of formal refugee recognition. This lack of formal recognition creates a different set of challenges for NGOs in Malaysia, where refugees are unable to work legally, access public services, or integrate into society. As a result, Malaysian NGOs face significant barriers in transitioning beyond basic aid provision.

Additionally, the collaboration between NGOs and government bodies in Malaysia is more limited compared to countries like Turkey, where NGOs and the government often work closely on refugee education and healthcare initiatives. In contrast, while NGOs in Malaysia collaborate with international organizations like UNHCR, their ability to influence government policy or advocate for systemic change is more constrained.

Reconceptualize the Concept of NGOs

Humanitarianism encompasses the concept of "refugee," in which refugees are positioned as powerless bodies in need, residing on the margins of a vacant humanitarian landscape.⁶⁰ In this discussion, we argue that NGOs should revise and adapt their approach to humanitarian aid, reflecting the historical transition that began with the Battle of Solferino and continues to the present. The Battle of Solferino marked a turning point in modern humanitarian aid, creating organizations like the Red Cross. At that time, humanitarian aid primarily focused on providing basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter to those affected by war and conflict. However, over time, the landscape of humanitarian assistance has drastically evolved. Initially, NGOs served as complementary entities providing aid to affected communities.⁶¹ However, they have grown into entities with greater influence, capable of shaping government and international policies- correcting power inequality.⁶² This evolution reflects a shift in humanitarian aid, which no longer merely meets basic physical needs but also drives social and political change. Research and case studies indicate that refugees worldwide, particularly in transit and host countries, often rely more on NGOs than local governments or international organizations like the UNHCR. Bureaucratic and political constraints frequently slow government responses, whereas NGOs tend to act more swiftly and effectively, especially in emergencies and crises.

NGOs have demonstrated their capacity to improve refugees' lives by providing educational opportunities⁶³ and sustainable livelihoods. For instance, refugees who initially lacked access to education have, through the support of NGOs, managed to pursue higher education and become professionals, such as engineers or doctors. NGO rescue efforts for refugees stranded at sea for months highlight their critical role in delivering emergency aid. Additionally, NGOs have saved many female refugees from sexual harassment and human trafficking, reaffirming their commitment to protecting the human rights of marginalized groups. However, these critical roles are predominantly carried out by international NGOs. While Malaysian NGOs have made notable contributions, they have not yet reached the same level of holistic support. The question now arises: How long will local NGOs continue to operate with traditional, limited approaches focused on basic aid? Should they not move toward more dynamic and holistic strategies? Nazri's⁶⁴ study argues that it is time for Malaysian NGOs to undergo an organizational transformation, expanding their efforts to provide "fish" and

"fishing rods"—helping refugees become self-reliant and reducing their dependency on NGO aid.- this is a crucial step in fostering sustainable livelihoods for refugee communities.

Historical Development: To be More Realistic

The current challenging context, such as the rising number of refugees due to conflicts and climate change, necessitates that NGOs adjust to new demands. Refugees now require more than just food, shelter, and healthcare; they need protection from systemic injustices that threaten their lives. For example, internationally, NGOs have taken more proactive steps by offering legal aid and serving as advocates for detained refugees.⁶⁵ They also play a significant role in combating human trafficking, sexual harassment, and other forms of social injustice experienced by refugees. Moreover, international NGOs have successfully influenced organizations like the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR to expedite the resettlement process for refugees in urgent need. Another issue that warrants attention is the uneven distribution of aid, often concentrated in major urban centers like Kuala Lumpur. Refugees in rural areas such as Kedah, Perlis, Terengganu, and Kelantan are frequently overlooked by NGO assistance- highlighting the need for NGOs to broaden their focus and ensure that aid reaches all refugees, regardless of geographic location. Focusing solely on urban areas creates disparities in resource distribution and opportunities for refugees living in more remote areas.⁶⁶

These challenges are not confined to host countries but also affect transit countries like Malaysia. Therefore, a transformation within NGOs is imperative regarding how they provide aid and their role as agents of social change. Malaysian NGOs should learn from international counterparts in countries such as Italy, Germany, Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, which have successfully implemented more holistic and dynamic approaches to supporting refugees. NGOs are no longer confined to providing emergency assistance; they must also contribute to building sustainable livelihoods and giving refugees a voice in decision-making processes that affect their futures. Thus, it is evident that NGOs must reconceptualize their approach to humanitarian aid, with a greater focus on sustainable and holistic solutions- including expanding their role in protecting refugees' human rights, offering more comprehensive support, and ensuring a more equitable and balanced aid distribution across the country.

CONCLUSION

This study outlines the historical development of NGOs, humanitarian aid, and refugees internationally and in Malaysia. Firstly, it aims to demonstrate the interconnection between them. First, we highlight that the relationship between the historical evolution of NGOs, humanitarian aid, and refugees at the international and Malaysian levels provides an essential foundation for understanding this context. This relationship shows that NGOs and refugee issues developed concurrently, with NGOs acting as a response to humanitarian crises that the state could not fully address. In Malaysia, this context may be more evident, as the history of the arrival of Rohingya refugees and, more recently, Syrian refugees has often seen NGOs as lifelines for refugees facing uncertainty regarding their status.

Second, NGOs' transformation in terms of their role in providing aid reflects a dynamic change in their approach. NGOs that previously focused solely on providing basic necessities are now acting more proactively by addressing the holistic needs of refugees. This transformation aligns with changes in time and place, where NGOs not only provide material aid but also engage in capacity-building, education, and advocacy. This evolution is crucial as it marks a shift from short-term relief efforts to long-term support to ensure the sustainable survival of refugees.

Third, the fact that refugees' lives are almost entirely dependent on NGOs highlights the failure or insufficiency of state systems and capacities to address this crisis. At the national level, states are often limited by resources or strict immigration policies, leading NGOs to become the last resort for refugees to receive basic support. NGOs have filled the gap left by the state, becoming the primary agents in meeting the humanitarian needs of refugees, both physically and psychosocially. Indirectly, we have successfully illustrated a significant shift in power from the state to NGOs in addressing refugee issues, especially in contexts where the state fails or lacks the capacity to respond adequately to humanitarian crises.

Eventually, in reconceptualizing the definition of NGOs, we must consider the changes driven by technological advancements and the current needs of refugees. The traditional definition of NGOs often refers to non-governmental organizations operating independently to provide humanitarian assistance. However, this definition must be expanded with the emergence of new challenges, particularly in the refugee context. Refugees' needs are now more complex, requiring NGOs to adopt a more holistic approach. While NGOs previously focused on fulfilling basic needs such as food, water, and shelter, they must now offer more comprehensive services such as psychosocial support, capacity-building, and human rights advocacy. NGOs' roles have also evolved to encompass efforts to address trauma, rebuild communities, and provide sustainable economic opportunities for refugees. This approach requires NGOs to be more flexible and collaborative with other stakeholders, including governments and the private sector. In this era, NGOs can no longer be seen as static entities functioning in the same manner as in the past. Instead, they should be viewed as dynamic organizations responsive to global challenges, particularly in humanitarian crises, while employing a more comprehensive approach to addressing the increasingly complex needs of refugees.

NOTES

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