

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE EXPANSION OF HUMANITARIAN SPACE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: NEGOTIATING HUMANITARIAN DIPLOMACY UNDER ASEAN'S NON-INTERVENTION NORM

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Abstract

This article examines how civil society organizations contribute to the expansion of humanitarian space in Southeast Asia through humanitarian diplomacy. Existing scholars offers competing interpretations of ASEAN humanitarian governance, with some studies arguing that ASEAN is progressing through the presence of formal mechanisms such as AADMER, the AHA Centre, and the Five-Point Consensus. Counterarguments highlight the persistence of sovereignty-centered regionalism, soft institutionalism, and the enduring influence of the non-intervention principle. However, limited attention has been paid to civil society actors' ability to champion humanitarian space within a regional order that continues to prioritize state sovereignty. Drawing on Finnemore and Sikkink's norm life cycle framework and engaging with Acharya's concept of norm localization, this article examines the role of the Humanitarian Forum Indonesia (HFI) as a faith-based humanitarian norm entrepreneur in facilitating humanitarian diplomacy and expanding humanitarian space. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research combines document analysis, ASEAN policy documents, organizational records, and semi-structured interviews with HFI representatives involved in humanitarian diplomacy initiatives. The findings show that HFI contributes to the expansion of humanitarian space across normative, institutional, and operational dimensions through humanitarian advocacy, institutional engagement, and the facilitation of humanitarian access. This paper argues that ASEAN is experiencing broader acceptance of humanitarian norms, but does not indicate the achievement of a norm cascade. ASEAN's evolving humanitarian governance is better understood as a process of strategic accommodation, in which humanitarian norms are selectively incorporated while the principle of non-intervention continues to shape the region's normative order.

Keywords: Humanitarian diplomacy, humanitarian space, civil society, ASEAN, non-intervention

INTRODUCTION

The principle of non-intervention has become a central organizing principle of regional relations in Southeast Asia. It is so central, unshakable,

and serves as a fundamental foundation for the creation of norms, principles, and even a shared identity within the framework of regionalism. It is also considered the most controversial aspect when discussing Southeast Asia (Sulaiman and Nelson 2024). Jones (2010) very well states the position of ASEAN member states regarding this principle, stating that amid the theoretical debate regarding ASEAN principles, convergence is found that it is almost impossible to see countries in Southeast Asia interfering in each other's domestic affairs. Constructivist approaches see the principle of non-intervention as a shared regional identity, realists view it as a power balance, while regime thinkers agree that ASEAN benefits in terms of regime security through this principle (Jones 2010). From the Cold War era that accompanied the inception of ASEAN to when this organization expanded its existing aspects of cooperation, this principle has remained untouched.

Southeast Asian countries prioritize maintaining peace and harmony, making them see non-intervention as a guarantee to prevent conflicts from arising through dialogue, trust and confidence building (Sukma 2012). Using its regime instruments, namely the Bangkok Declaration, the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, all ASEAN countries have the tacit knowledge to respect the territorial integrity of each country and the right to regulate its own domestic affairs, without interference from external parties (Bellamy and Drummond 2011). Several familiar phrases used by ASEAN member countries in relation to this principle include: the ASEAN way, the spirit of ASEAN, doing things the ASEAN way, and Think ASEAN (Yukawa 2017). The point is that ASEAN has its own approach in the region, decision-making by consensus, peaceful dispute resolution, and refraining from the use of force.

The centrality of states in Southeast Asia has sparked debate, particularly given the global challenges that demand collaborative solutions and the emergence of humanitarian issues considered shared by the international community. Balancing the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle with non-intervention in Southeast Asia is a challenging task (Bellamy and Drummond 2011), Given that ASEAN upholds state supremacy,

R2P views sovereignty as a responsibility, not an absolute right, ASEAN is often accused of using this principle to shield member states committing humanitarian violations from excessive external scrutiny, particularly from outside the region, and to trivialize human rights violations (Collins 2018). With the emergence of various humanitarian crises faced by countries in the region, it is central to examine how these problems are resolved with the principle of non-intervention still being the main guideline held by the region.

ASEAN countries face various humanitarian challenges, but the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar is the largest, most complex, and still ongoing. In Rakhine State, inter-communal violence in 2012 led to the displacement of approximately 145,000 people. About 25,000 of these IDPs were assisted to return or relocate by the end of 2015, with individual housing support being provided by the Rakhine State Government with support from the international community. As of September 2016, some 120,000 IDPs remained in 36 camps or camp-like settings across Rakhine, of which about 79 percent are women and children (United Nations 2017). The conflict has left 18.6 million people in need of humanitarian assistance, a figure that could reach one-third of Myanmar's total population (Johnson 2024). In terms of Total Direct Conflict Fatalities, 52,720 people were killed, making it the deadliest conflict worldwide between January 2021 and May 2024. The percentage of civilian casualties reached 17%, with only the conflicts in Palestine, Nigeria, and the Republic of Congo having more civilian casualties due to the direct impact of conflict than Myanmar (Johnson 2024). The number of internally displaced people by the end of 2024 will reach more than 3.5 million, facing challenges such as lack of food, clean water, and protection. A regional emergency response is crucial, given that the conflict has displaced 1.3 million people from Myanmar who have sought refuge in surrounding countries (UNICEF 2025).

The humanitarian crisis in Southeast Asia pits the prioritization of humanity through the concept of responsibility to protect (R2P) against ASEAN's principle of non-intervention. In his article, Tana (2013) discusses the position of civil society organizations as norm entrepreneurs for the

implementation of R2P in Southeast Asia. Borrowing from Finnemore and Sikkink's (1998) notion of the norm life cycle, which involves a three-stage process: norm emergence, norm cascade, and norm internalization, Tana et al. state that civil society organizations are the actors working on the norm emergence of R2P in Southeast Asia, framing human security issues as the region's main agenda (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Furthermore, Gonzalez and Mendoza's (2010) argument explains how CSOs exercise three kinds of power to affect the shift in focus of human security from a state-centric to a people-centered perspective: decisional power, which relates to policy-making and political influence; direct or indirect intervention through lobbying, advocacy, monitoring, protest, and participation; and discursive power or the power to shape and disseminate politically relevant values, norms, and theories, thereby codetermining the behavior of states and other actors; and regulatory powers, which relate to rule making and institution building (Tana 2013; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). The position of civil society organizations in this case is discussed only normatively, namely that the emergence of the R2P concept in Southeast Asia is more advocated by transnational organizations, reflecting the norm emergence in the norm life cycle of Finnemore and Sikkink.

Existing scholars offers competing interpretations of ASEAN humanitarian governance. Those who see ASEAN progressing in addressing humanitarian issues point to the establishment of formal mechanisms within ASEAN, such as AADMER and the AHA Centre, to demonstrate the development of humanitarian norms (Caballero-Anthony 2014, 2017). Meanwhile, a critical view of ASEAN's progress on humanitarian issues highlights the persistence of sovereignty-centered regionalism, soft institutionalism, and elite-managed governance and emphasizes that the changes occurring in ASEAN are a form of adaptation to current developments and do not necessarily indicate the occurrence of substantial transformation (Jones 2012; Rüländ 2011; Acharya 2004). While Finnemore and Sikkink provide an influential framework for understanding norm diffusion, subsequent scholars has questioned the assumption that norms spread

through a largely linear process. Acharya, with the concept of norm localization, believes that actors' acceptance of an international norm will vary, not be universal, as an implication of the actor's ability to sort out acceptance of the new norm when juxtaposed with pre-existing normative beliefs and institutional arrangements. Norm diffusion will be in contact with negotiation and adaptation, which in the context of this research is relevant to Southeast Asia, which links humanitarian norms with deeply embedded principles of sovereignty and non-intervention. Rather than replacing existing norms, humanitarian ideas are often selectively incorporated into regional practices in ways that preserve the ASEAN Way.

While existing studies explain ASEAN's humanitarian governance either as normative progress or institutional adaptation, they pay less attention to the mechanisms through which civil society organizations expand humanitarian space under the continuing constraints of non-intervention. One crucial area that needs to be examined is how civil society actors can maintain their roles amidst the strong dominance of the principle of non-intervention. This article addresses this gap by examining how the Humanitarian Forum Indonesia (HFI) facilitates humanitarian diplomacy, builds institutional networks, and negotiates humanitarian access in the context of the Myanmar crisis. This paper will focus on investigating how humanitarian space can be expanded by connecting the interactions between civil society actors and the current ASEAN framework, rather than attempting to address either normative transformation or institutional stagnation. Humanitarian space is a space that is understood as a product of the dynamic and complex interplay of political, military and legal actors, interests, institutions and processes (Heintze and Thielbörger 2018). In the ASEAN context, this refers to the normative, institutional, and political room available for non-state actors to participate in humanitarian governance guided by universal principles of humanitarianism.

To avoid misconceptions, this article distinguishes humanitarian diplomacy from humanitarian assistance and humanitarian intervention. Humanitarian diplomacy refers to a process involving humanitarian actors

negotiating access, building networks and trust in conflict areas, garnering support, and facilitating the distribution of aid to affected victims. This differs from humanitarian assistance, which refers to the provision of relief and protection to populations affected by conflict, disaster, or displacement, and humanitarian intervention, which is larger in scale, closely related to the use of political and military coercion to protect populations experiencing existential threats, often raising concerns regarding state sovereignty and external interference (Ginty and Peterson 2015). This distinction is useful to provide context relevant to ASEAN's continued prioritization of the principle of non-intervention, including in its response to humanitarian crises. Therefore, this study focuses on humanitarian diplomacy as the primary mechanism through which civil society organizations expand humanitarian space. HFI will be examined within the framework of its role in fostering humanitarian space within the political and normative boundaries established by ASEAN's non-intervention framework, not with the aim of presenting a link to rights-based intervention or coercive forms of external involvement. Consequently, this study does not assume that humanitarian norm development in Southeast Asia follows a linear trajectory from norm emergence to norm cascade. Instead, insights from norm localization are used to understand how humanitarian principles are selectively adapted within a regional environment still shaped by non-intervention.

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine how civil society organizations expand humanitarian space in Southeast Asia. HFI's presence in regional and global humanitarian diplomacy through its involvement in AKIM (Aliansi Kemanusiaan Indonesia untuk Myanmar) and the Indonesian Humanitarian Alliance (IHA) in the humanitarian response to the Myanmar issue led to its selection as the primary case in this study. This makes it relevant to discuss how civil society actors operate within a regional environment shaped by ASEAN's non-intervention norm. The primary data for this study comes from semi-structured interviews with HFI officials, specifically the HFI Executive Director, who is directly involved in humanitarian diplomacy initiatives and humanitarian coordination related to

Myanmar. The interviews were conducted virtually on June 10, 2025. This paper also utilizes official reports, policy documents, ASEAN publications, humanitarian organization reports, academic literature, and publicly available materials concerning humanitarian governance in Southeast Asia as complementary data for this research. Furthermore, the data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. Interview transcripts and documentary sources were coded according to themes derived from the analytical framework, including humanitarian diplomacy, humanitarian space, norm entrepreneurship, institutional adaptation, and non-intervention. To identify the mechanisms through which HFI sought to expand humanitarian access and influence humanitarian governance processes, this paper juxtaposes and compares interview results, HFI independent reports, and relevant academic literature as a comprehensive testing tool to reduce the risk of organizational self-representation shaping the analysis.

DISCUSSION

Non-Intervention and the Structural Limits of Humanitarian Space in Southeast Asia

ASEAN's nature must be traced back to its inception. The Southeast Asian region became an arena for superpower influence, with its countries experiencing the massive impact of the tug-of-war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Amidst this turmoil, ASEAN was formed with the founding members' enthusiasm for economic growth and expanded cooperation. However, it cannot be denied that security and significant political tensions were key factors contributing to ASEAN's birth. The institution's presence was expected to provide new bargaining power for the Southeast Asian region in determining its own destiny amidst a security landscape dominated by the spread of liberalism and communism. During its formation, ASEAN demonstrated its character as an institution free from external influences, and pressure from major powers was irrelevant to a free and open ASEAN. This spirit is evident within ASEAN, which emphasizes the

prohibition of coercion and aggressive influence on fellow member states (Leifer 2013).

Non-intervention also emerged from the initial idea that formed ASEAN's shared identity. ASEAN's founding members, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines, recognized the need for a region with distinctive characteristics and framed this idea within the concept of "One Southeast Asia," which became the foundation for expanding ASEAN's membership to 10 by the late 1990s. Amidst various internal dynamics, coupled with the influence of external forces, ASEAN continues to establish itself as one of the most cohesive regions in the world, primarily by strengthening regional relations through three regional communities, covering political-security, economic, and socio-cultural affairs. ASEAN uses this as capital to unite its vast diversity, building an inclusive and conflict-free identity. The "ASEAN Way," which was built as a shared identity, emphasizes fundamental differences in the way of interaction, characterized by informal nuances, consensus, non-confrontational negotiations, and a preference for a non-legalistic and non-binding problem-solving approach (Acharya 2017).

ASEAN's principle of non-intervention is very significant because it is the initial foundation for member states as stated in the Bangkok Declaration of 1967. By adopting this principle, ASEAN affirmed its determination to prevent external intervention in order to maintain regional stability. ASEAN continued the implementation of this principle in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in 1976, where fellow member states will not interfere in each other's domestic affairs. The principle of non-intervention is indeed a general principle, widely adopted by various actors, but ASEAN makes this inherent in its relational practices, not merely a customary norm (Katsumata 2003) in the writing (Molthof 2012). In the practice in question, it would be good for us to refer to Bellamy and Drummond (2011) and Nesadurai (2009) as published in the article (Molthof 2012) that argue ASEAN views the principle of non-intervention as broadly interpreted, with its meaning not specifically formulated but rather constructed over time based on member

states' practices when domestic issues arise within the region. As a result, the principle of non-intervention serves as a safeguard against disrupting the existence of the ruling regime and has evolved into a political tool for states.

The TAC, an internal regional product of the 1976 ASEAN Summit, enshrined the "mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all nations," has been continued by ASEAN as a guideline for the institution's external relations. Any country outside the region seeking to establish bilateral or multilateral partnerships in an institutional format must recognize the principles and mechanisms of interaction within the Southeast Asian region. These principles, in particular, include the absence of external intervention in a country's domestic affairs, the settlement of disputes by peaceful means, and the principle of non-confrontation and cooperation embedded with territorial integrity, sovereignty, equality, and independence in the ASEAN Way. ASEAN draws its stance from several major events, including the non-aligned movement in the Third World, which emanated from the Bandung Conference of 1955. It demonstrated its reluctance to be drawn into external confrontation, creating the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) regime (Villanueva 2025).

The TAC, in turn, was used symbolically by ASEAN to address the ongoing dynamics in the region. When conflicts arose between member states, for example, Indonesia vs. Malaysia, Malaysia vs. Singapore, and Cambodia vs. Thailand, ASEAN did not activate Article 14 of the TAC concerning the High Council as a dispute resolution mechanism and allowed its member states to bring the matter to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Instead, ASEAN reiterated its emphasis on institutional decisions based on the TAC. The TAC's intention was to create a 'no-war regime' in the region to achieve development and prosperity, and to work in the way ASEAN leaders desired—ASEAN countries enjoyed mutual peace and experienced economic development and growth. This was quite evident at the end of the Cold War when it became apparent that ASEAN was providing its members with political stability and economic prosperity, attracting the interest of other

countries that had not yet officially become permanent members of ASEAN. In turn, TAC is an absolute requirement given by ASEAN in the process of expanding membership by referring to the following stages: (1) Those states wishing to join ASEAN had to accede to the TAC to express their willingness to accept the spirit of the TAC and good neighborly relations between ASEAN members; (2) ASEAN gives the status of ASEAN Observer to those countries that acceded to the TAC so they can become familiar with the practice of the various ways of cooperation and consultation within ASEAN; and (3) As ASEAN observers, those countries that have become accustomed to the practices of ASEAN are to be offered full membership on the condition that they accept all agreements and declarations of ASEAN since its inception (Yamakage 2017).

ASEAN's institutionalized principle of non-intervention has indeed served as a solid guideline for member states. However, it should also be noted that this principle has presented several obstacles to resolving regional issues. The implementation of this principle makes it difficult for each member state's sovereign regime to be affected by its policies. Demonstrating the stance of ASEAN and its member states on several sensitive issues in the region can help us understand these obstacles. ASEAN's reluctance to become deeply involved in the "People Power" revolution in the Philippines, only expressing concern over the developing situation, its minimal reaction to the Thai military government's coercive actions against demonstrators in 1992, and its acceptance of Vietnam and Myanmar as members despite the spotlight placed on both countries for their internal situations related to human rights violations and the existence of a communist political system (Acharya 2003).

Amidst the emergence of various humanitarian issues in the region, including the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar, the persistence of non-intervention in Southeast Asia should not be understood solely as resistance to humanitarian governance. This principle needs to be understood more broadly, namely that politically and historically, the principle of non-intervention has been a key foundation in the process of regionalism in Southeast Asia. It has become a shield for the region that developed in the

post-colonial era, providing a sense of security against external threats to the territorial existence, sovereignty, and independence of states. With this principle, member states have a mechanism for building trust among member states, a legal principle, political legitimacy, and a shared commitment to protecting the entire Southeast Asian region from external intervention and maintaining regional order (Acharya 2003).

Lee Jones discusses the existence of ASEAN's principle of non-intervention in a similar vein to Acharya, but emphasizes its role in serving the interests of regime stability, elite consensus preservation, and the protection of political authority from external scrutiny. ASEAN's current position does not reflect a reluctance to incorporate broad humanitarian norms, but rather represents the accumulation of interests in maintaining regional order, preserving institutional integrity, and serving the strategic interests of individual member states (Jones 2012). Understanding these dynamics is essential for explaining why humanitarian norms in Southeast Asia are often accommodated selectively rather than allowed to fundamentally transform existing regional practices.

HFI as a Faith-Based Humanitarian Norm Entrepreneur: Expanding Humanitarian Space through Humanitarian Diplomacy

A key focus for ASEAN's development is whether the openness of stakeholder participation has been accompanied by an increased role in policymaking. ASEAN has updated its blueprint in its ASEAN 2025 vision, declaring itself not only a people-centered and people-oriented organization but also a priority on good governance. While there has been increasing accommodation for stakeholder participation, this has not been accompanied by sufficient space for involvement within ASEAN, particularly in influencing policy (Nandyatama et al. 2016). Recently, ASEAN has faced significant pressure regarding the conflict in Myanmar and its failure to implement the five-point consensus for peace in Rakhine. A refreshing argument is presented by (Spastyono, Malik, and Wahyudi 2024) ASEAN's reluctance to abandon the traditional principle of non-intervention stems from its lack of relevance. This principle has made communication within ASEAN less tense, making critical

issues easier to manage. ASEAN has even become a communication platform that flexibly resolves issues without creating new ones. Therefore, the problem lies not with the principle of non-intervention itself, but rather with its excessive use, turning it into a poison, allowing ASEAN to seek refuge in complex issues. Excessive use of the principle of non-intervention has become a barrier to resolving humanitarian crises, as countries seek refuge behind it.

Referring to Heintze and Thielbörger, who view humanitarian space as the normative, institutional, and operational space available for humanitarian actors to participate in humanitarian governance, this paper examines how HFI contributes to the expansion of humanitarian space in Southeast Asia. This paper is not limited to the framework of humanitarian assistance, but rather examines HFI's efforts to expand humanitarian space through three interconnected mechanisms: the promotion of humanitarian norms, the construction of institutional networks, and the facilitation of humanitarian access through humanitarian diplomacy.

At the normative level, HFI contributes to the expansion of humanitarian space by promoting humanitarian principles beyond traditional state-centered approaches. Through the adoption of humanitarian values derived from international humanitarian principles and their dissemination among interfaith organizations, HFI helps socialize humanitarian norms within Indonesian and regional civil society networks. HFI opens discourse on humanitarian issues by promoting humanitarian values, norms, and principles. One of the strategic roles of the Humanitarian Forum Indonesia as a forum institution is to consistently promote humanitarian values, norms, and principles through its members and broader network. This policy is outlined in the Humanitarian Forum Indonesia membership mechanism, where every member who joins is required to uphold the established values and norms and be able to implement humanitarian principles. Furthermore, the values, norms, and principles that form the promotional content of the Humanitarian Forum Indonesia refer to those developed by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Agreement on these values and principles strengthens HFI and has led to its growing recognition. Furthermore, these

universal values and norms have attracted a number of humanitarian organizations to join HFI (AKIM 2017).

Based on this policy, interfaith advocacy efforts were chosen as a step in optimizing humanitarian services throughout Indonesia. Interfaith collaboration efforts are carried out in various humanitarian programs, including promoting public policies related to disaster management, for example, including the inclusion of a proposed amendment to Law No. 24/2007 concerning Disaster Management to include interfaith humanitarian advocacy. Through the network of organizations Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, which are the parent organizations of LPBI NU and MDMC, lobbying efforts are being made to promote policies through audiences with the House of Representatives (DPR) and the Regional Representative Council (DPD). Furthermore, several HFI member institutions that have programs to mentor and strengthen regional capacity are pushing for the creation of regional policies related to disaster risk reduction. Other interfaith advocacy efforts are also carried out by issuing several statements of position by the Humanitarian Forum Indonesia family on humanitarian issues with ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup nuances both in the national and international context. These statements were compiled by HFI through the Secretariat to advocate the importance of religious institutions in assisting with humanitarian issues, and these statements were jointly promoted by a number of faith-based humanitarian organizations at the international level (AKIM 2017).

HFI also expands institutional space by creating networks that connect humanitarian organizations, governments, international agencies, and local actors. The growth of HFI membership and the formation of coalitions such as AKIM and IHA demonstrate efforts to institutionalize humanitarian cooperation beyond individual organizations. At the beginning of HFI's formation in 2008, its initial members were Lembaga Penanggulangan Bencana Muhammadiyah (MDMC), Yakkum Emergency Unit (YEU), Dompet Dhuafa (DD), KARINA-KWI, Wahana Visi Indonesia (WVI), Yayasan Tanggul Bencana Indonesia (YTBI), and Perkumpulan Peningkatan Keberdayaan

Masyarakat (ACE) (Humanitarian Forum Indonesia, n.d.). Greater partnerships are continuously sought, as evidenced by the growing membership of HFI through a number of humanitarian organizations, including the PKPU Human Initiative, which joined in 2011, Church World Service (CWS) Indonesia in 2011, and Habitat for Humanity Indonesia in 2012, Unit Pengurangan Risiko Bencana Persekutuan Gereja-gereja di Indonesia (PRB PGI) and Yayasan Rebana Indonesia in 2013, Rumah Zakat in 2014, Lembaga Penanggulangan Bencana dan Perubahan Iklim Nahdlatul Ulama (LPBI NU) in 2015 and BAZNAS Tanggap Bencana (BTB) in 2016. To date, the total number of HFI members has reached 20 members, consisting of Islamic, Christian, Catholic, non-religious NGO associations and religious-based organizations (Humanitarian Forum Indonesia, n.d.). HFI's goals are clear: humanitarian norms, principles, and standards must be readily available and pursued seriously and widely campaigned for.

HFI's involvement in international humanitarian issues, particularly in the Southeast Asian region, can be traced back to the conflict in Myanmar in 2017. The worsening situation in Rakhine State, where the region had the highest rate of acute malnutrition globally in 2015-2016, and in the same year, the total number of refugees in Rakhine State reached 402,000, along with various other important issues, led HFI to take part in the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar. Together with various humanitarian organizations from Indonesia, HFI collaborated in the Indonesian Humanitarian Alliance for Myanmar (AKIM) to initiate a program that was expected to help reduce the problems that occurred. In HFI's involvement in Myanmar's humanitarian issues through AKIM, various collaborative steps were implemented, including collaborating with the Indonesian government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and the Indonesian Embassy for Myanmar in implementing the program (AKIM 2017). In addition, a partnership was also established with an international organization, namely UNOCHA Sittwe, which also facilitated AKIM consultations with nine local non-governmental organizations, most of whom are from the Rakhine community.

A monumental step was taken in HFI's efforts to engage in humanitarian issues on a broader scale, namely by changing from AKIM to the Indonesian Humanitarian Alliance (IHA). IHA is a development program of AKIM (the Indonesian Humanitarian Alliance for Myanmar), which previously focused on providing humanitarian assistance to communities affected by the conflict in Myanmar with the aim of helping to achieve peace in Rakhine State. Through its program in Bangladesh, IHA focuses on providing basic services for Rohingya victims living in a number of refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar, which re-emerged on August 25, 2017, has caused approximately 603,000 Rohingya to cross the border to Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Responding to the current situation in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, several Indonesian NGOs collaborated through IHA to provide direct assistance to the ongoing crisis.

Under the umbrella of the IHA, HFI, along with various other humanitarian organizations (the majority of IHA members are HFI member organizations), is expanding its involvement in humanitarian crises in other regions, without ignoring the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Myanmar. The role of the Indonesia Humanitarian Alliance (IHA), which consists of Humanitarian Forum Indonesia (HFI) Muhammadiyah (MDMC dan LazisMu), Nahdlatul Ulama (LPBI-NU dan LazisNu), Human Initiative, Dompot Dhuafa, DT Peduli, Rumah Zakat, LAZIS Wahdah, DMII, dan Baitul Maal Hidayatullah, FOZ, KARINA, Laznas LMI, BAZNAS, Lazis Wahdah, Dewan Dakwah Indonesia, Yayasan Dana Sosial Al-Falah, Nurul Hayat, YayasanAl Kahfi, Social Trust Fund, dan Sinergi Foundation as a humanitarian actor abroad has increased significantly through the expansion of its membership and the scope of its involvement (IHA 2018). Partnerships with the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Indonesian Embassy in Myanmar, UNOCHA, and local organizations in Rakhine further illustrate how HFI operates as a bridge between state and non-state actors. Rather than challenging ASEAN's institutional framework directly, HFI expands opportunities for humanitarian engagement through collaborative institutional arrangements.

The expansion of humanitarian space is also evident at the operational level. In Myanmar, where humanitarian access has been heavily constrained by political sensitivities and the principle of non-intervention, HFI and its partners sought to secure access through humanitarian diplomacy rather than political advocacy. The presence of HFI also provides an alternative in the operational realm of providing aid to communities in need, especially an alternative for countries that are often hampered by bureaucratic processes. In an interview with the Executive Director of HFI, it was stated that "Indonesia itself has actually initiated 'Indonesian Aid' but the domain is still under the Ministry of Finance so that the problem in practice is difficult to determine who the actors will be involved. So far, what has been in effect is that when the Indonesian government wants to provide aid, the type of assistance provided is only in the form of funds or goods and there is still a tug of war between the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and so on" (Interview with HFI 2025). On the other hand, HFI conducts negotiations, diplomacy, and networking with government officials in conflict areas, fellow civil society organizations, and independent institutions. Specifically in Rakhine State, HFI is working to expand Humanitarian Space through two channels: the official government channel, which obtains permission from local authorities, and the individual channel—collaborating with independent institutions that officially have access to participate in the humanitarian crisis in the conflict area of Myanmar. Operational humanitarian space did not emerge automatically. Access was secured through humanitarian diplomacy involving coordination with local authorities, local humanitarian organizations, Indonesian diplomatic representatives, and international humanitarian actors. Rather than challenging Myanmar's sovereignty claims directly, HFI sought to work within existing political constraints to negotiate humanitarian access.

While negotiating humanitarian access by leveraging its position as a faith-based humanitarian actor, HFI maintains collaboration with the Indonesian government, the local government in Rakhine State, local Myanmar civil society organizations, and independent institutions such as

UN Agencies in Myanmar. This collaboration enabled HFI, in its early involvement through AKIM and IHA, to gain access to conduct studies in conflict areas, namely Sittwe and Maungdaw, before launching programs to facilitate the needs of conflict-affected communities. Then, a program called Humanitarian Assistance for Sustainable Community (HASCO) was formed, which was designed to help the Myanmar government overcome the humanitarian crisis that occurred in one of its regions. HFI then facilitated the provision of assistance to communities in Rakhine State who fled to Bangladesh, including; health services, education in emergency situations, establishment of shelters, provision of temporary housing, establishment of several public facilities, provision of clean water, and sanitation. The initial phase of the IHA program in Bangladesh was implemented for 6 months (from September 2017-February 2018) and was extended until December 2018. IHA in carrying out its duties-built networks with various parties, including the Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Dhaka, the Government of Bangladesh both at the National and Regional levels, Clusters organized by UN Agencies. In implementing its program, IHA collaborates with several local partners and networks in Bangladesh as an effort to optimize the program and the process of delivering aid to beneficiaries. IHA started the program in Bangladesh on September 18, 2017 by conducting needs assessments and distributing food aid (IHA 2018).

Through various HFI engagements, HFI's contribution to the emergence of humanitarian norms has been broadly demonstrated by expanding normative, institutional, and operational space for humanitarian action. However, this should not be interpreted as evidence of a norm cascade. It is noteworthy that HFI's activities are heavily influenced by state access, both by the country where it is based and especially by the Myanmar government. HFI's various efforts to expand humanitarian space must be implemented within a framework mutually acceptable to all parties involved. This implies that although humanitarian norms have become increasingly visible and humanitarian access has expanded in selected contexts, the level of socialization, behavioral conformity, or normative internalization required by

Finnemore and Sikkink's norm cascade stage has not yet been identified. Instead, the findings indicate a process of strategic accommodation in which humanitarian initiatives are increasingly accepted while the principle of non-intervention remains largely intact.

Strategic Accommodation and the Limits of Humanitarian Norm Development in ASEAN

In this article, strategic accommodation refers to a process in which ASEAN and its member states selectively incorporate humanitarian norms, humanitarian activities, and institutional innovations while continuing to preserve the principle of non-intervention as the dominant organizing norm of regional order. While these developments suggest increasing regional attention to humanitarian concerns, they do not necessarily indicate a transition toward norm cascade. Instead, this article argues that ASEAN's evolving humanitarian governance is better understood as a process of strategic accommodation, whereby humanitarian norms are selectively incorporated without fundamentally displacing the norm of non-intervention. The concept is used here as an analytical description of ASEAN's pattern of humanitarian norm development rather than as a new theoretical framework. It captures the selective incorporation of humanitarian concerns into regional institutions and policies without implying a fundamental displacement of the long-standing norm of non-intervention.

Humanitarian issues in Southeast Asia continue to evolve over time. While the region continues to receive attention for its handling of humanitarian issues, the region, through ASEAN, has experienced an evolution with the emergence of humanitarian discourse and related political policies amidst a strong principle of non-intervention. Southeast Asia and ASEAN, as a regional organization, have not completely ignored the humanitarian crisis. Gradually, ASEAN has adopted a formal institutional framework and adapted to the evolving regional situation. In terms of institutional mechanisms, the 26th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in 1993 laid the foundation for the human rights narrative to become a regional agenda, reflecting global trends in humanitarian issues in the 1990s (Maulana and

Putra 2024b). In addition to the shifting global narrative, the growing regional attention to humanitarian issues was also influenced by the economic turbulence in 1997-1998, making ASEAN introduce the people-oriented idea which includes introducing the role of civil society in policy making while simultaneously striving for a creative community (Ginanjar and Maksum 2022).

ASEAN addresses humanitarian issues through the establishment of specialized agencies, as well as emergency response efforts undertaken by ASEAN governments in response to various crises. ASEAN officially launched the first ASEAN People's Assembly in 2000, marking the formal recognition of the role of civil society by ASEAN and its member governments (Ginanjar and Maksum 2022). To address massive humanitarian crises caused by natural disasters such as the 2004 Aceh Tsunami, Typhoon Durian in 2006 in the Philippines, and human rights issues, ASEAN signed the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER) in 2005, as a commitment to developing national and regional disaster management capabilities. Likewise, the establishment of the AHA Centre in 2011 as an effort to deal with natural disasters and has now developed into manufactured humanitarian crises as a form of commitment as a people-centered and people-oriented regional organization. ASEAN also established the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) in 2009 to manage human rights issues, which is consultative, through consensus-based decision-making and provides space for human rights promotion for civil society (Chen, Ne, and Sembiring 2018), (Cook 2021a), (Sabilla and Yuniasih 2022), (Maulana and Putra 2024a), (Ginanjar and Maksum 2022).

Several previous studies can be cited regarding the development of humanitarian issues and the position of civil society actors amidst the dominant role of state political elites in Southeast Asia. The expanding security discourse has gradually shifted the focus of states away from their role as centers of security and toward initiating humanitarian policies in collaboration with non-state actors (Barthwal-Datta and Basu 2017). ASEAN countries appear to be quicker to carry out collaborative work by involving

non-state actors, inter-governmental cooperation, including external parties when facing non-traditional issues such as counter-terrorism, as seen in the joint military exercises in Singapore in May 2016 involving 40 Special Forces teams from all 18 ADMM+ (Tan 2018). While still upholding the principle of non-intervention, the emergence of various crises has opened up new space for ASEAN to seek new approaches in dealing with existing issues, without remaining fixated on its traditional methods (Wong and Brown 2016).

ASEAN member states are beginning to enjoy systemic policies within their region through the AHA Center, which plays a central role in addressing non-traditional security issues. The AHA Center supports national governments of recipient countries in disaster management policies, even engaging in operational and practical work with strong collaboration (Chen, Ne, and Sembiring 2018). Similarly, the increasing legitimacy of the ASEAN body, AADMER, has led several countries, particularly those with a high potential for natural disasters, to align their policies with AADMER (Lassa 2017). This situation opens up opportunities for a shift in perspective within ASEAN and encourages regional countries to pay more serious attention to humanitarian issues. So far, humanitarian diplomacy in Southeast Asia has been most effective in disaster response, although questions remain about whether existing policies are inclusive and non-discriminatory (Cook 2021b).

In the institutional realm, ASEAN accommodates the inclusion of humanitarian issues through the ASEAN Political-Security Community Blueprint, which regulates ASEAN's efforts to create a stable region and emphasizes democracy and the rule of law of ASEAN states, the respect and protection of human rights and freedom (Li, Feng, and Zheng 2023). This demonstrates ASEAN's development and openness to formulating institutional commitments in addressing the emergence of various humanitarian crises in the region. Currently, the 2012 ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, which would historically hallow out an article on the 'right to peace,' is the first human rights declaration by national governments ever to come out of Asia. In this regard, they agreed to hold two separate regional consultations: first, between the Commission and the ASEAN Sectoral Bodies,

and second, between the Commission and regional and national civil society organizations (CSOs) (Villanueva 2025). ASEAN has adopted in 2012 the Guidelines on Accreditation of Civil Society Organizations and the AICHR adopted the Guidelines on AICHR's Relations with Civil Society Organizations for engagement with civil society organizations dealing with human rights and their accreditation (Muntarbhorn 2025).

Looking at the internal scope of the Southeast Asian region, the Myanmar crisis which broke out again in 2021 shows major changes in ASEAN with the occurrence of institutional embedding and policy adoption where ASEAN brings the humanitarian agenda into the formal realm of its institutions. Myanmar's internal conflict was responded to by the release of the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus (5PC), a mechanism aimed at immediately ending violence in Myanmar and providing humanitarian assistance. Considering that for a very long time ASEAN has been reluctant to get deeply involved in the internal conflicts of one of its member countries, Jurgen Haacke in his writing even calls 5PC a new consensus created in ASEAN. This agreement is a form of ASEAN's legal involvement in member countries' internal issues, for the first time collectively addressing internal issues of one of the member countries, the consensus to exclude the State Administrative Council from ASEAN summits and foreign ministers' meetings (Haacke 2025).

Tedi Gunawan described ASEAN's collective efforts in Myanmar as a place where the evolution of shared norms and identity within ASEAN took place. The intensification of discussions among ASEAN member states through the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings and Special Summits to open humanitarian access and end the conflict in Myanmar was an indicator of a shift in norms. Indonesia, which at that time acted as ASEAN Chair through its active diplomacy, along with the involvement of other member states in formulating collective efforts in Myanmar, signaled a shift in the region's security approach and a greater commitment to humanitarian values (Gunawan 2024). Indonesia's Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi, who is also the new Special Envoy of the ASEAN Chair, emphasized recently that only through engagement with all stakeholders can the 5PC's mandate to facilitate

an inclusive national dialogue be fulfilled. More significantly, on the pressing agenda of providing humanitarian assistance to all vulnerable sectors in Myanmar, ASEAN leaders unequivocally conferred "some degree of autonomy" to the ASEAN Secretary-General and the AHA Centre. This is a positive development as it could help eradicate any bureaucratic impediments at the regional level that had hampered the AHA Centre's delivery of humanitarian assistance for Myanmar (Caballero-Anthony 2023).

While humanitarian assistance appears to be the easiest thing to implement in ASEAN's Five-point agenda, a number of factors have hindered this objective. Aside from the continuing violence and concerns about the safety of humanitarian actors, there is great concern that any international aid, which must be channelled through the State Administration Council (SAC), may not reach the affected communities. (Centre for Strategic and International Studies 2021). Despite more serious discussions on humanitarian issues in Myanmar, and a collective political consensus, the implementation of humanitarian activities in Myanmar remains hampered by the Myanmar government's insistence that the crisis is purely an internal issue. Various humanitarian aid efforts are also hampered by the Myanmar government's political interests, not to mention the perceived ineffectiveness of aid distribution.

The presence of the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus on the Myanmar conflict normatively indicates an increasing willingness to acknowledge humanitarian concerns as a regional issue. However, several important points need to be considered regarding the implementation of this agreement: the consensus remains firmly constrained by state sovereignty and non-intervention. Furthermore, the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus does not include the capacity for compelling compliance, making the implementation of this consensus considered ineffective in resolving the conflict in Myanmar. Therefore, the Five-Point Consensus should not be interpreted as evidence that ASEAN has entered a norm cascade. While signalling growing recognition of humanitarian concerns in ASEAN, the Five-Point Consensus also demonstrates the continued efforts of ASEAN member states to prioritize

sovereignty and non-intervention. In this sense, the consensus represents an instance of institutional adaptation and strategic accommodation rather than a fundamental transformation of regional norms.

ASEAN member states did collectively agree to launch the 5PC, but they did not simultaneously take further policy decisions regarding its implementation in Myanmar, taking into account the principle of non-intervention. This demonstrates the absence of a norm cascade, measured by when a critical mass of states adopts a norm and actively socializes other actors into accepting and complying with it. At this stage, norm acceptance is driven not merely by persuasion from norm entrepreneurs but also by legitimacy concerns, peer pressure, institutional socialization, and expectations of appropriate behavior. This situation resonates with Acharya's argument that norm diffusion in Southeast Asia often occurs through localization rather than wholesale adoption. Acceptance of humanitarian norms does increase when the 5PC serves as a precedent for ASEAN's collective political agreement on an internal conflict within a member state, but this does not necessarily fundamentally alter the region's normative foundations. Similarly, the limited internalization of norms overall in ASEAN, as seen from humanitarian mechanisms that largely operate only to the extent that they remain compatible with state consent and national sovereignty, indicates the lack of a comprehensive, fundamental change to the region's normative order.

Nevertheless, the absence of a norm cascade does not imply normative stagnation. The presence of humanitarian actors such as the Humanitarian Forum Indonesia has contributed to the gradual expansion of humanitarian space across normative, institutional, and operational dimensions. There is broader legitimacy for humanitarian discourse, the development of broader institutional networks, and humanitarian access has become more feasible through cooperation among civil society organizations, governments, and local partners. As observed in the context of Myanmar, there is broader acceptance of the need to provide humanitarian assistance in conflict areas through the 5PC agreement, and various actors are allowed to participate in

humanitarian activities. However, in their direct implementation, ASEAN and member states act cautiously to avoid being perceived as violating Myanmar's sovereignty. The development of humanitarian norms in ASEAN does not necessarily replace existing norms; rather, humanitarian principles are selectively interpreted and incorporated in ways that remain compatible with local political realities. Consequently, humanitarian governance in ASEAN reflects a process of negotiated adaptation rather than a linear transition toward norm cascade. Therefore, ASEAN's response to humanitarian crises is therefore best understood not as a case of normative transformation, but as an evolving process of strategic accommodation.

CONCLUSION

This article examines the role of the Humanitarian Forum Indonesia (HFI) in expanding humanitarian space in Southeast Asia through humanitarian diplomacy. Through the promotion of humanitarian norms, the construction of institutional networks, and the facilitation of humanitarian access, this study demonstrates that HFI is able to contribute to humanitarian governance. This is evident in the expansion of humanitarian space normatively, institutionally, and operationally in the region.

The research findings indicate that humanitarian norms are gaining wider acceptance, marked by the formation of AADMER, the AHA Centre, and the Five-Point Consensus, but have not yet reached the norm cascade proposed by Finnemore and Sikkink. The findings suggest that the conditions associated with norm cascade such as broad state socialization, behavioural conformity, peer pressure, and deeper normative internalization remain only partially present. This condition is more consistent with Acharya's argument that norm diffusion in Southeast Asia often occurs through adaptation and localization rather than wholesale adoption. The implementation of humanitarian norms remains constrained by the enduring influence of sovereignty and non-intervention.

Therefore, ASEAN's evolving humanitarian governance is best understood as a process of strategic accommodation, in which ASEAN and its member states selectively choose the humanitarian norms they adopt without

neglecting the region's established normative order. This paper contributes to the literature by showcasing the role of civil society organizations in expanding humanitarian space under existing political constraints, even though they are not positioned to bring about substantial change. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its focus on a single case and qualitative evidence. Future research may examine comparative cases across Southeast Asia to better understand the varying pathways through which humanitarian diplomacy shapes humanitarian governance and humanitarian access in the region.

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