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## Transnational Social Diplomacy of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah through Non-Formal Education for Children of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Malaysia

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### Kata Kunci :

Diplomasi Sosial;  
Transnasionalisme;  
Nahdlatul Ulama;  
Muhammadiyah;  
Pendidikan Non-formal

### Abstrak

Fenomena migrasi tenaga kerja Indonesia ke Malaysia telah menimbulkan dinamika sosial transnasional yang kompleks, terutama terkait dengan keterbatasan akses pendidikan bagi anak-anak pekerja migran yang tidak memiliki dokumen resmi. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis praktik diplomasi sosial transnasional yang dilakukan oleh Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) dan Muhammadiyah dalam konteks pendidikan anak-anak pekerja migran Indonesia, dengan mengeksplorasi sinergi antara pendekatan *soft power* dan transnasionalisme. Metode yang digunakan adalah deskriptif kualitatif melalui wawancara, tinjauan literatur, dan dokumen kebijakan terkait. Analisis dilakukan secara tematis untuk mengidentifikasi strategi, aktor, dan implikasi sosial dari implementasi diplomasi pendidikan lintas batas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa NU dan Muhammadiyah berperan dalam memperkuat citra Indonesia sebagai negara moderat dan beradab melalui praktik diplomasi pendidikan berbasis nilai. Pembentukan lembaga pembelajaran komunitas, kolaborasi dengan Kedutaan Besar Indonesia dan Sekolah Indonesia di Kuala Lumpur (SIKL), serta adaptasi kurikulum kontekstual telah membentuk ekosistem diplomasi kemanusiaan yang efektif. Diplomasi ini memperkuat daya tarik moral Indonesia, membangun solidaritas antarnegara, dan memperkuat kepemimpinan moral Indonesia di kawasan.

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### Keywords :

*Social Diplomacy;*  
*Transnationalism;* *Nahdlatul*  
*Ulama;* *Muhammadiyah;*  
*Non-formal Education.*

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### Abstract

*The phenomenon of Indonesian labor migration to Malaysia has given rise to complex transnational social dynamics, particularly in relation to limited access to education for the children of migrant workers who do*

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*not have official documents. This study aims to analyze the practices of transnational social diplomacy carried out by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah in the context of education for Indonesian migrant workers' children, by exploring the synergy between soft power and transnationalism approaches. The methods used are descriptive qualitative through interviews, literature reviews, and related policy documents. The analysis was conducted thematically to identify the strategies, actors, and social implications of the implementation of cross-border educational diplomacy. The results of the study show that NU and Muhammadiyah play a role in strengthening Indonesia's image as a moderate and civilized country through value-based educational diplomacy practices. The establishment of community learning institutions, collaboration with the Indonesian Embassy and the Indonesian School in Kuala Lumpur (SIKL), and the adaptation of a contextual curriculum have formed an effective humanitarian diplomacy ecosystem. This diplomacy strengthens Indonesia's moral appeal, builds solidarity between countries, and strengthens Indonesia's moral leadership in the region.*



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## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of cross-border labor migration has become one of the most significant transnational dynamics in Southeast Asia in the last two decades. The World Migration Report 2024 notes that there are more than 280 million international migrants worldwide, with a large proportion coming from developing countries in Asia (IOM, 2024). Among these migrant-sending countries, Indonesia occupies an important position, especially in Malaysia, due to the increasing flow of workers to Malaysia since the early 1990s (Sopyan, 2021). Based on data from the Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency as shown in Figure 1, Malaysia ranks third as the main destination country for Indonesian migrant workers with a total placement of 51,723 people. This figure is below Hong Kong, which ranks first with 99,773 workers, and Taiwan in second place with 84,581 workers. The dominance of these three countries reflects the geographical and historical orientation of Indonesian labor migration, which is centered in East Asia and Southeast Asia (DataIndonesia.id, 2024).

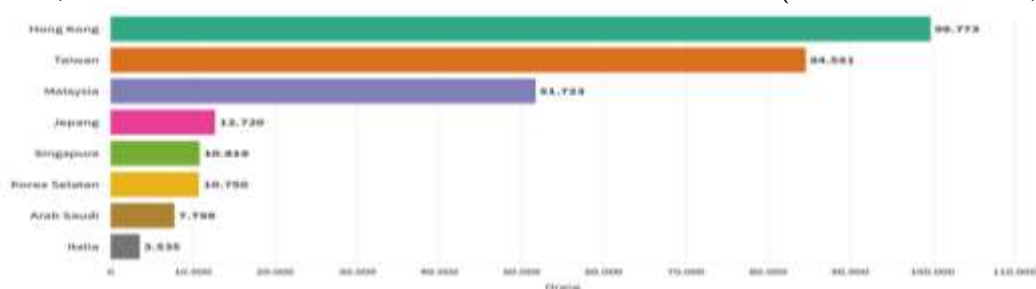


Figure 1. Countries with the Most Indonesian Migrant Workers in 2024 (Source: Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency (BP2MI)).

In the context of Malaysia, geographical proximity, cultural similarities between the Malay peoples, and complementary economic ties between the two countries are determining factors that strengthen labor migration flows (Maksum, 2022; Nabilah et al., 2025). The long-standing bilateral relationship in the field of labor has also contributed to the formation of a relatively stable ecosystem of cross-border worker mobility, particularly in the domestic, manufacturing, and plantation sectors, which are structurally still dependent on labor from Indonesia (Sahrul & Daulay, 2025).

In addition to these structural factors, the temporal dynamics of migrant worker placement throughout 2024 show significant fluctuations, which can be interpreted as a reflection of the complex interaction between global labor market demand, migration policies, and domestic socioeconomic conditions. Based on BP2MI data, as shown in Figure 2, the number of migrant workers dispatched in 2024 has increased progressively.

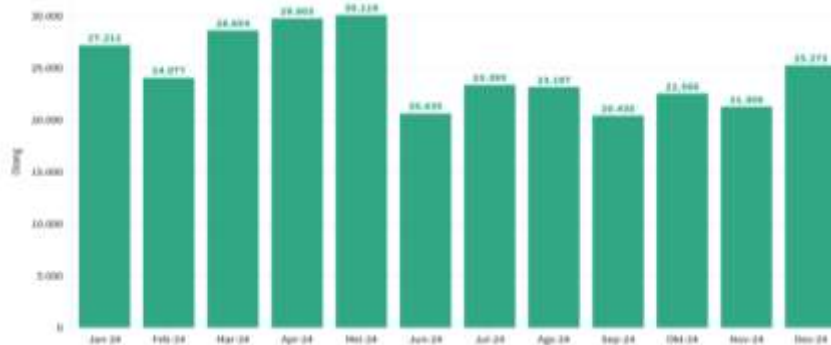


Figure 2. Number of Indonesian Migrant Workers in 2024

Based on Figure 2, in the first quarter, the highest peak occurred in May 2024 with 30,118 people. This trend indicates an increase in labor demand from major destination countries such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Malaysia, especially towards the middle of the year when many sectors experience increased economic activity. However, after reaching its peak, the number of placements declined sharply in June 2024 to 20,635 people, most likely due to seasonal factors such as contract adjustments, religious holidays, and administrative restrictions in destination countries.

However, after this decline, the number of Indonesian migrant workers placed abroad showed a pattern of sustained stabilization until the end of 2024, with an average of between 22,000 and 25,000 people per month, reaching 25,273 people in December 2024 (DataIndonesia.id, 2024). This pattern indicates the existence of an adaptive mechanism in Indonesia's labor migration system that is able to respond flexibly to external dynamics, both in terms of the Indonesian government's policy to strengthen safe, legal, and protection-based migration governance, as well as in terms of recipient countries that continue to adjust their labor regulations to the needs of strategic sectors (Moeis, 2025; Regus et al., 2024; Rusfiana & Kurniasih, 2024). This stability also indicates that Indonesia's migration system has developed into a transnational network that is driven not only by economic factors, but also by

increasingly structured institutional coordination and cross-border policies (Putri & Trisni, 2021).

Behind this stability and economic dynamism lie complex and multi-layered social issues, particularly those related to the lives of migrant workers' families abroad. One prominent issue is the vulnerability of Indonesian migrant children, who often lose access to formal education due to their parents' undocumented immigration status or work in the informal sector (Nurhadi et al., 2023; Siswanto et al., 2025). This phenomenon confirms that labor migration cannot be understood solely as economic mobility, but also as a social process that has consequences for the basic rights, welfare, and social reproduction of migrant communities (Saefudin et al., 2024).

In this context, there is an urgent need for non-formal education as a form of social and cultural protection for migrant children (Aqila, 2023; Sari et al., 2022). A number of studies show that non-formal education functions as a safety net to guarantee the right to education for marginalized groups who cannot be reached by the formal education system (Simbolon, 2025). In Malaysia, the geographical conditions of remote plantations and industrial areas make Indonesian migrant workers' children in Sabah and Sarawak highly dependent on Community Learning Centers (CLCs) and Guidance Centers (*Sanggar Bimbingan/SB*) as their main means of obtaining education (Loganathan et al., 2022).

In facing these challenges, the two largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, play a very significant role as non-state actors implementing transnational social diplomacy. Through cooperation with the Education and Culture Attaché of the Indonesian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, both organizations established Guidance Centers (*Sanggar Bimbingan/SB*) in various regions of Malaysia, especially in pockets of the Indonesian migrant worker community (Mahzumi et al., 2025; Sahrul & Daulay, 2025). The non-formal educational activities carried out by NU and Muhammadiyah cadres not only serve to provide access to learning, but also reflect soft diplomacy that showcases Indonesia's humanitarian, religious, and inclusive image abroad (Mahzumi et al., 2025).

Historically, NU and Muhammadiyah are two moderate Islamic organizations with strong roots in education and community empowerment (Song et al., 2025). Both have developed thousands of educational institutions in Indonesia and are now expanding their transnational activities through diaspora networks and socio-religious institutions abroad (Setiadi et al., 2023). In the context of the migrant community in Malaysia, their social da'wah approach is tailored to the needs of the diaspora, which emphasizes character education, national values, and religious moderation as the foundation for the formation of national identity abroad (Purba & Azizah, 2024). Thus, the Guidance Centers managed by NU and Muhammadiyah cadres not only function as alternative educational institutions but also as instruments for forming "transnational social capital" namely networks of solidarity and national values that transcend national borders (Aththoillah et al., 2024).

From an international relations perspective, the non-formal educational activities carried out by NU and Muhammadiyah in Malaysia can be understood as a form of transnational social diplomacy, in which civil society actors serve as agents connecting cross-border relations through social, cultural, and humanitarian interactions. This diplomacy does not take place in the formal realm between countries, but at the community level (people-to-people diplomacy), where the values of trust, solidarity, and humanity become instruments for strengthening Indonesia's soft power (Nye, 2008). In this context, non-formal education plays a dual role as a mechanism for empowering migrant children and as a nation branding strategy that affirms Indonesia's commitment to inclusive education and cross-border child protection (Rohmatika et al., 2024).

Previous research on non-formal education for Indonesian migrant workers' children in Malaysia shows the interconnection between social, legal, and diplomatic aspects that shape the cross-border child protection ecosystem. Arief (2021) highlights the role of civil society organizations such as Migrant Care in advocating for the educational rights of migrant workers' children through lobbying for the establishment of Community Learning Centers (CLCs) and advocating for identity documents for undocumented migrant workers. Using the theory of roles and systems, this study emphasizes that civil society initiatives serve as a bridge between the needs of migrant communities and state policies.

Anggraeni et al. (2025) reinforce the legal dimension by examining migrant children's access to education based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Education Act 1996, and the Child Act 2001 in Malaysia. They found that although Malaysia has ratified the CRC, its implementation is still hampered by policy discrimination, unclear citizenship status, and fear of deportation, resulting in many migrant children relying on costly informal education. From the perspective of state diplomacy, Purba & Azizah (2024) examined the strategies of the Indonesian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur in addressing the issue of education for undocumented Indonesian migrant workers' children. This research shows that educational diplomacy is carried out within the framework of national interests, focusing on the establishment of SB, the facilitation of National Student Identification Numbers (NISN), and inter-country collaboration to expand access to education for migrant children.

Meanwhile, Qomariyah et al. (2024) examined the role of the *Sanggar Bimbingan An-Nahdloh* under the coordination of the Indonesian Embassy's Cultural Attaché as an effective non-formal education unit in reaching undocumented PMI children. Using a phenomenological approach, this study shows that after joining the Guidance Center, migrant workers' children acquired basic literacy skills (reading, writing, arithmetic) and gained assurance of educational continuity upon returning to Indonesia through official certificates. In a social context, Gymnastiar et al. (2024) added the perspectives of literacy and character education by showing that non-formal education programs in the Indonesian migrant worker children's community in Malaysia, such as financial literacy and nationalism training, not only improve

functional competencies but also strengthen the national identity and cultural awareness of migrant children (Gymnastiar et al., 2024).

From these five studies, it is evident that non-formal education for Indonesian migrant workers' children in Malaysia is the result of a complex interaction between state policy, diplomatic initiatives, and the role of civil society. However, a research gap remains in that there are no studies that explicitly position religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah as actors of transnational social diplomacy. Previous studies have focused more on the administrative, legal, and formal diplomatic dimensions, while the dimension of religious soft power through Islamic mass organization networks has not been mapped in depth. In fact, NU and Muhammadiyah have a strategic role in establishing and managing *Sanggar Bimbingan* (guidance centers) and building social legitimacy at the grassroots level of migrants.

This study integrates three interrelated theoretical pillars (soft power and social diplomacy, transnationalism, and human security) to analyze how Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah operationalize transnational social diplomacy through non-formal education for children of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. The soft power concept (Nye, 2008) provides the foundation for understanding diplomacy through attraction, persuasion, and moral legitimacy rather than coercion. In this context, NU and Muhammadiyah embody non-state soft power actors that project Indonesia's moderate Islamic values, pluralism, and humanitarian commitment through educational practices. These educational activities constitute a form of social diplomacy, emphasizing people-to-people interactions, trust-building, and the transmission of values that strengthen Indonesia's positive nation branding and moral authority abroad (Bjola & Kornprobst, 2018; Anholt, 2007; Rankin, 2012).

The transnationalism and human security perspectives complement this framework by explaining the structural and humanitarian dimensions of diplomacy. The transnationalism lens (Nye & Keohane, 1971) situates NU and Muhammadiyah as part of broader Islamic and civic networks that operate beyond the formal state system, filling governance gaps where both home and host states fall short in protecting migrant children's educational rights. Meanwhile, the human security framework (UNDP, 1994; Anthony, 2016) positions education as both a protective and empowering mechanism that safeguards individuals from vulnerability while promoting social resilience. Integrating these perspectives, this study conceptualizes education-based transnational social diplomacy as a collaborative, community-level diplomacy model where religious-based civil society functions simultaneously as a humanitarian actor and as an informal diplomatic agent that enhances Indonesia's international moral standing and cultural influence.

## METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of how religious-based non-state actors, particularly Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, conduct transnational social diplomacy through non-

formal education activities for Indonesian migrant children in Malaysia (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022). The main objective of this study is to analyze how these two organizations act as agents of human security and cultural diplomacy in protecting the right to education and strengthening the socio-religious identity of migrant children living outside the territorial borders of Indonesia.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with various relevant stakeholders, including representatives of the NU and Muhammadiyah communities. In addition, this study also utilized field observations at several Guidance Centers managed by the two organizations, as well as document analysis of institutional reports, teaching materials, and official publications of the organizations. Purposive sampling was used to select informants who were directly involved in non-formal education and social diplomacy activities for migrant communities. This strategy ensured that the perspectives obtained were contextual, authentic, and reflected real experiences in the field (Furidha, 2024; Villamin et al., 2025). The informants in the data collection can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview Informant

ID Participant	Role/Organization	Gender	Interview Date
P1	Teacher at Muhammadiyah Guidance Center	Female	August 28, 2025
P2	Coordinator of Muhammadiyah Guidance Center	Male	August 28, 2025
P3	Migrant Parents (Muhammadiyah Guidance Center)	Female	August 28, 2025
P4	NU Guidance Center Teacher	Female	August 28, 2025
P5	NU Guidance Center Manager	Male	August 28, 2025

This study uses discourse analysis as its main analytical tool (Nowell et al., 2017). This approach is used to reveal how NU and Muhammadiyah construct narratives of diplomacy, religious values, and national identity through non-formal educational activities in migrant communities. Discourse analysis allows researchers to examine both the textual meanings that appear on the surface (such as socialization materials, interviews, and public documents) and the deeper ideological meanings related to moral legitimacy, human solidarity, and the representation of Indonesia as a religious and inclusive nation. This approach is relevant in civil society studies because it explains how religious organizations use social rhetoric and strategic narratives to build their roles and authority in transnational spaces (Villamin et al., 2025; Walsham, 1995).

Regarding research ethics, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and participant confidentiality was strictly maintained. Interviews were conducted in Indonesian according to participant preference and recorded with their permission. All interview results were then carefully transcribed, translated into English, and re-verified to ensure data validity and reliability. To increase the validity of the findings, this study applied data triangulation, which is combining the results of interviews, field observations, and institutional document analysis. The results of the analysis are presented through qualitative themes that highlight narrative patterns, social representations, and diplomatic practices carried out by NU and Muhammadiyah. Direct quotes from informants, contextual field data, and observation notes are included to strengthen the depth of analysis and interpretation.

The entire research process was carried out in stages, including context identification, data collection, transcription, thematic coding, discourse analysis, and integration of results with the previously outlined theoretical framework, particularly related to the concepts of human-security, and transnational social diplomacy. The research flow can be seen in Figure 3.

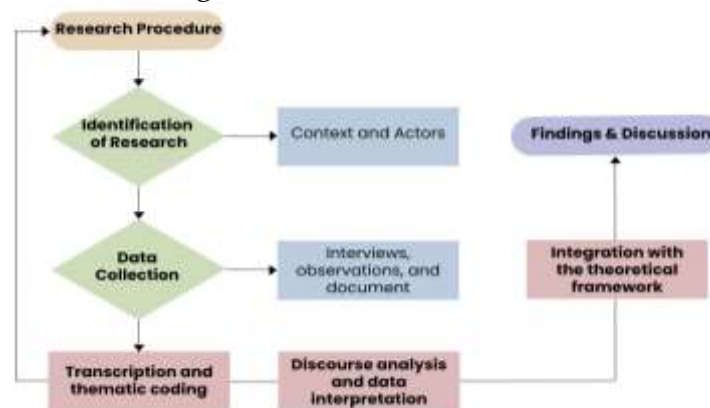


Figure 3. Research Flow and Methodology

This method provides a holistic understanding of how Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah carry out cross-border social diplomacy through non-formal educational activities oriented towards the protection of migrant children and the formation of Indonesia's humanitarian image in Malaysia.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Overview of Guidance Centers and Social Context

The existence of guidance centers managed by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah in Malaysia plays a significant role in addressing the educational access gap for Indonesian migrant children who do not have legal documents. At a descriptive level, these centers operate in Kuala Lumpur and its surrounding areas, with a non-formal education model that combines basic subjects such as Indonesian language, mathematics, and Islamic religious education, as well as life skills

development activities. The teachers and administrators are mostly volunteers from among Indonesian students, educated workers, and diaspora communities affiliated with these religious organizations (Agusman et al., 2024; Kinasih et al., 2023; Setiadi et al., 2023).

These findings are consistent with Chamchan's (2025) research, which shows that civil society-based organizations, particularly non-governmental organizations and community groups, play an important role in facilitating access to education for migrant children in Southeast Asia. A comprehensive study on the education of migrant children in Thailand shows that when the formal education system cannot accommodate the needs of migrant children due to administrative and legal barriers, community-based organizations become a vital mechanism for ensuring that the right to education remains accessible (Chamchan, 2025). Similarly, research by Lipnickienė et al. (2018) identifies that collaboration between the formal and non-formal education sectors enables the creation of safe and responsive spaces for children from migrant backgrounds to develop academic and social skills (Lipnickienė et al., 2018).

In the specific context of NU and Muhammadiyah Guidance Centers, analysis of qualitative data shows that the main motivation for establishing and managing these centers is a strong desire to preserve the national and religious identity of migrant children so that they do not lose their sense of attachment to Indonesia. This perspective reflects a deep understanding of the dynamics of transnational identity faced by second-generation and migrant children in the context of diaspora. Research on identity formation among young diasporas shows that education in community institutions plays a crucial role in mediating identity negotiations between attachment to the culture of origin and the need to adapt to the local environment (Mazzucato & Haagsman, 2022; Moeis, 2025). In this context, Indonesian migrant children do not merely acquire academic knowledge, but also undergo a process of identity maintenance and cultural preservation that is essential for their long-term psychological and social development. Interviews with NU volunteer teachers reveal the depth of this motivation. One teacher stated:

*"We teach not only so that children can read or count, but so that they continue to know Indonesia, know Islam that is friendly, and feel they have a safe place."*  
(P4).

This statement reflects a pedagogical orientation that goes beyond the transfer of formal knowledge. These teachers understand that education has a fundamental identity dimension, especially for children living in conditions of uncertainty and social marginalization. The concept of a "safe space" mentioned by the teacher refers to research that has documented the importance of an inclusive and supportive educational environment in building the psychological resilience of children who have experienced migration (Shahimi et al., 2024).

Similar motivations were also expressed by the manager of the Muhammadiyah Guidance Center, who emphasized that non-formal education is a form of "cross-border social service and da'wah" that also embodies a moral responsibility towards

fellow citizens abroad. This framing is important because it shows that the motivation for providing education is not purely based on economic or instrumental considerations, but rather on a normative commitment to humanitarian and Islamic values. Literature on the role of religious organizations in social services shows that faith-based organizations often actualize their mission through concrete actions that combine religious teachings with responses to urgent social needs (Abdullah, 2024). In this case, NU and Muhammadiyah interpret Islamic values that emphasize social responsibility (social mandate) and solidarity with fellow Muslims wherever they are as an imperative to take an active role in the protection and empowerment of migrant children.

Thus, education at the Guidance Center is not merely a pedagogical function in the conventional sense, but a multidimensional means that simultaneously functions as an instrument of protection and empowerment of human security, a mechanism for maintaining national and religious identity, a space for socialization that integrates vulnerable children into a supportive community network, and a means of social diplomacy that promotes Indonesian values of moderation and humanity to local Malaysian communities and the global public (Pierce, 2024).

### **Program Structure and Educational Activities**

The structure of activities at the Guidance Center is generally divided into two complementary forms, namely regular learning activities and socio-religious activities. The organization of these two components reflects a holistic understanding of education that goes beyond the mere transfer of academic knowledge, but also includes character building, identity, and social integration. The learning model with lower frequency but longer duration per session reflects the principles of non-formal education that emphasize flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of learners (Almeida & Morais, 2025). The literature on flexible curriculum design shows that learning designed with consideration for the diversity of learners' backgrounds and life situations significantly increases engagement and learning outcomes (Andrade & Alden-Rivers, 2019; UNESCO, 2015).

Teaching materials are compiled independently by volunteers, while others are adapted to the local context of migrant children (Azizah et al., 2024). This adaptive approach is important considering that children not only need to master academic competencies recognized in Indonesia, but also practical skills relevant to their lives in Malaysia. Research on learning in diaspora communities shows that the most effective curriculum is one that connects the educational standards of the country of origin with the contextual needs of the country of residence, creating meaningful relevance for learners (Moeis, 2025).

The learning content includes basic literacy in Indonesian (reading, writing, arithmetic), Islamic Religious Education with an emphasis on moderate values, Civic Education with a focus on understanding national symbols and Indonesian history, as well as life skills such as communication, cooperation, and problem solving (Azizah et

al., 2024; Jatiningsih et al., 2024; Lestari et al., 2024; Monica et al., 2024; Saefudin et al., 2024). This curriculum structure demonstrates the integration of three dimensions of learning, namely academic, spiritual-religious, and character building. This integration is in line with the principle of holistic learning, which is recognized in contemporary educational literature as the most effective approach in developing not only intellectual capacity but also emotional, social, and moral maturity (Ejileugha, 2022; Romadhon & Aslan, 2025).

In addition to academic learning, the Guidance Center also holds periodic social and religious activities that have a significant psychological and identity impact. These activities include the commemoration of Indonesian Independence Day, the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, Isra Mi'raj, as well as various national competitions such as poetry reading, singing the national anthem, and coloring the red and white flag. Although these activities are only carried out a few times a year, their impact on the formation of children's identity and learning motivation is very significant (Sahrul & Daulay, 2025).

From a symbolic perspective, these activities function as "identity rituals" that strengthen awareness of membership in the national community. Symbolic interactionism theory suggests that humans construct meaning through social processes and continuously modify these meanings through interpretation that occurs during social interaction (Anggraeni et al., 2025).

Testimonials from a Muhammadiyah volunteer about the meaning of these activities are very illustrative:

*"Activities like this create a 'little Indonesia space' in Malaysia, which becomes a place for children to feel pride in their national identity and moderate Islamic values." (P1 and P2)*

The expression "little Indonesia space" shows an awareness of the dual function performed by the Guidance Center. First, physically and socially, the center creates an enclave where Indonesian values, symbols, and practices are reproduced and respected. Second, psychologically, this space facilitates what is referred to in the literature on diaspora as "maintenance of ethnic identity" or "cultural preservation," a continuous effort to preserve and pass on cultural heritage to the next generation (Pierce, 2024).

These activities are also important in the context of the psychological well-being of migrant children. Research on the well-being of refugee and migrant children shows that experiences of discrimination, social marginalization, and legal uncertainty create significant psychological burdens (Korp & Stretmo, 2020; Martin et al., 2021). In this context, the presence of social spaces where children feel accepted, valued, and celebrated serves as an important protective factor for their mental well-being. National celebrations that involve recognition and appreciation of children's contributions in the form of competitions and performances help build self-confidence and social belonging, which are often eroded by experiences of stigmatization in the broader context (Korp & Stretmo, 2020).

## Support and Collaborative Networks

Institutionally and systemically, the NU and Muhammadiyah Guidance Centers do not operate in isolation, but rather within a collaborative network involving various strategic actors. At the most formal level, these centers collaborate closely with the Indonesian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, particularly through the Education and Culture Attaché (Atdikbud). This collaboration represents a meeting point between non-state actors (religious organizations) and state actors (official government representatives) in achieving a common goal, namely the protection of the educational rights of Indonesian migrant children (Annisa & Nizar, 2022; Purba & Azizah, 2024).

The network between Indonesian Islamic organizations in Malaysia also contributes significantly to fundraising and providing additional volunteers. This network includes community organizations, Islamic boarding schools or study centers, as well as Indonesian Muslim individuals who are committed to the education of migrant children. The contribution of this broader network reflects what is referred to in the literature on social capital as "bonding social capital," strong bonds within groups that share the same values and identity (Wijaya, 2024).

## Impact on Migrant Children and the Community

Based on field observations, in-depth interviews, and program documentation analysis, the study found that the existence of *Sanggar Bimbingan* has significant social, psychological, and identity-related impacts on migrant children and the broader diaspora community. In terms of access to education, the most direct impact is the opening up of learning opportunities that were previously closed to undocumented migrant children (Loganathan et al., 2022). Children who were previously unable to access Malaysia's formal education system due to administrative barriers now have the opportunity to develop basic literacy and fundamental cognitive skills. For children living in a context of legal uncertainty, this access means the difference between a scenario where they fall behind in education and a scenario where they have opportunities for future socioeconomic mobility (Khayyer et al., 2021).

In addition to access to academic learning, *Sanggar Bimbingan* also provides a "social space safe from discrimination," a dimension that is often not fully appreciated but has a profound psychological impact. Migrant children often face discrimination, alienation, and social stigmatization in formal schools and in their daily lives in Malaysia (Korp & Stretmo, 2020). Guidance Centers, with caring leadership and a community of fellow migrants, create an environment where children can learn without fear of experiencing the negative experiences they often encounter in the broader context. Research on the impact of safe learning environments on the well-being of vulnerable children shows that the presence of supportive and inclusive social spaces is a very important protective factor in building resilience and long-term psychological well-being (Howard et al., 2024).

In terms of identity, field observations show that children who consistently attend the *Sanggar Bimbingan* program demonstrate clear improvements in their

Indonesian language skills and more expressive pride in national symbols. They are more proficient in reading and writing Indonesian and more confident in using their mother tongue in contexts where Malaysian is the main lingua franca. At the symbolic level, children show clear respect for the Indonesian flag, can sing the national anthem correctly, and are able to recount basic facts about Indonesian culture and history to their Malaysian friends. This stronger level of identification is important because, in the context of diaspora, the maintenance of a positive ethnic-national identity has been shown to correlate with better psychological well-being and more successful social integration (Moeis, 2025).

The communal impact is also clearly evident in the increased confidence and social connectedness between migrant communities and official state representatives. Activities involving Muhammadiyah leaders, such as visits, award ceremonies for outstanding students, or joint activities at important national events, create experiences where children and their families feel recognized and valued by their country of origin. This experience plays a role in strengthening what can be called a "diplomatic connection at the grassroots level," a bond formed through direct interaction between diaspora citizens and state actors, creating positive sentiments and solidarity towards the country of origin (Surpi et al., 2025).

More importantly, the *Sanggar Bimbingan* program cumulatively contributes to strengthening people-to-people diplomacy between Indonesia and Malaysia. When Indonesian children educated at *Sanggar Bimbingan* interact with their Malaysian friends at school, they bring with them narratives about Indonesia that are moderate, humanistic, and committed to education. They share songs, stories, and values that reflect Indonesia's identity. In small but meaningful ways, they become informal "brand ambassadors" for Indonesia, building more positive understanding and empathy among Malaysia's younger generation towards Indonesia and its citizens. The literature on cultural diplomacy shows that intergenerational exchanges and the transmission of values through informal social interactions are often more effective in building positive long-term relationships than formal diplomacy (Pierce, 2024; Surpi et al., 2025).

At the individual level, qualitative data from interviews with migrant parents showed strong positive perceptions of the program's impact. Parents reported an increase in their children's motivation to learn, improvements in discipline, and most importantly, their children's expressed pride in their national identity. Some parents also reported that *Sanggar Bimbingan* teachers had helped their children overcome trauma or emotional difficulties they experienced as a result of migration. These testimonials show that the impact of the program goes beyond academic achievement alone, but also encompasses broader psychological and emotional well-being dimensions (Martin et al., 2021).

## Discussion

### **Soft Power and Social Diplomacy: Education as a Tool for Value Diplomacy**

The concept of soft power proposed by Nye (2008) explains that a country's power is not only measured by military or economic strength, but also by its ability to influence others through the appeal of its values, culture, and credible public policies. In the context of Indonesia-Malaysia relations, education for migrant workers' children has become the main arena for the application of Indonesia's soft power diplomacy. Through non-formal education such as Community Learning Centers (CLC) and Guidance Centers (SB), Indonesia disseminates the values of nationalism, humanity, and moderate Islam without political confrontation. This process shows that education-based social diplomacy not only functions as a public service mechanism but also as a nation branding strategy that highlights Indonesia's religious, tolerant, and humanistic image (Loganathan et al., 2022; Nowell et al., 2017).

Non-formal education has also become a tool to strengthen Indonesia's humanitarian diplomacy in the Southeast Asian region. Diplomatic efforts such as the establishment of the Indonesian School in Kota Kinabalu (Sekolah Indonesia Kota Kinabalu/SIKK) and CLC are the result of long-term cooperation between the Indonesian and Malaysian governments through a memorandum of understanding that emphasizes the principles of non-intervention and humanity. The implementation of this policy demonstrates Indonesia's ability to use soft power to protect the educational rights of migrant workers' children without causing bilateral political friction. By prioritizing educational cooperation, Indonesia has built a strong moral position as a nation that upholds human rights and cross-border solidarity (Jatmika & Dollah, 2022; Widiawati et al., 2023).

Education is also used as a means of value diplomacy by religious organizations. Through teaching and learning activities that incorporate character building and national values, NU and Muhammadiyah teachers act as grassroots diplomats who introduce national values and moderate Islam to the second generation of the Indonesian diaspora in Malaysia. The educational process that combines religious learning, cultural literacy, and national practices such as singing the Indonesian national anthem or commemorating Independence Day serves as performative diplomacy that builds national identity pride in transnational spaces (Aqila, 2023).

Through this approach, education not only facilitates knowledge transfer but also expands Indonesia's cultural influence. It forms an infrastructure of attraction that presents Indonesia as a civilized, just nation committed to universal education. The effectiveness of social diplomacy through non-formal education proves that soft power can be exercised sustainably through daily practices that have a concrete impact on migrant communities (Purba & Azizah, 2024).

## **Transnationalism and Non-State Actors: The Role of NU and Muhammadiyah in the Transnational Space**

The theory of transnationalism explains that in an increasingly connected world, the flow of ideas, values, and people crosses national borders and creates social networks run by non-state actors (Nye & Keohane, 1971). In the context of Indonesian social diplomacy in Malaysia, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah are two key actors that emphasize how contemporary diplomacy is no longer the monopoly of the state, but rather a cross-border social practice carried out by civil society. Both organizations provide non-formal education for the children of Indonesian migrant workers, using different but complementary models. NU uses a cultural and pesantren-based approach that emphasizes the spiritual dimension and moderation of Islam, while Muhammadiyah has developed a modern education system with a structured curriculum and organization-based management (Abdullah, 2024).

The role of NU and Muhammadiyah in Malaysia demonstrates a model of governance beyond the state, where the state and civil society work collaboratively. In a situation where Malaysian policy limits migrant children's access to formal schooling, these two organizations have taken on social responsibility by establishing alternative schools, providing volunteer teachers, and forming partnerships with institutions such as the Humana Child Aid Society and the Indonesian School in Kuala Lumpur (SIKL). These activities not only fill the gaps in public services left by the state, but also expand the reach of Indonesia's social diplomacy through education and social outreach (Yuvanti, 2021; Yuvanti, 2021; Regus et al., 2024).

Muhammadiyah's role in Malaysia also underscores the function of religious organizations as social mediators that bridge national policies with the local needs of the diaspora. Through the Special Branch Leadership of Muhammadiyah (PCIM) and the Special Branch Leadership of Aisyiyah (PCIA) in Malaysia, they not only established Guidance Centers and Community Learning Centers (PKBM), but also adapted the Indonesian curriculum to be relevant to the Malaysian social context. This strategy demonstrates how Islamic and Indonesian values are translated into educational practices that build solidarity and social cohesion across borders (Rusfiana & Kurniasih, 2024).

Meanwhile, NU plays a crucial role in maintaining social and spiritual harmony among migrant communities. Through social-religious activities, NU instills the values of Islam Nusantara, which emphasizes a balance between tradition and modernity. This approach results in social stability and reduces the potential for identity conflicts in Indonesian migrant communities in Malaysia. Thus, NU and Muhammadiyah act as transnational moral agents that carry out social diplomacy in a sustainable manner without coercive state instruments (Regus et al., 2024; Abdullah, 2024).

## **Synergy of Soft Power and Transnationalism: Cross-Border Social Diplomacy**

The synergy between soft power and transnationalism produces a model of cross-border social diplomacy that is unique to Indonesia: diplomacy that relies on values, social networks, and collective action across countries. In the context of educating the children of migrant workers in Malaysia, the integration of these two approaches is clearly seen in the way NU and Muhammadiyah translate national values into tangible educational services. Education is no longer understood merely as a domestic instrument, but as a means of spreading national values and moderate Islam in transnational social spaces (Moeis, 2025; Maksymova et al., 2025).

This practice of transnational soft diplomacy involves collaborative architecture between mass organizations, diplomatic institutions, and local communities. The *Sanggar Bimbingan* program, the Indonesian School in Kuala Lumpur, and Community Learning Centers are concrete examples of social diplomacy that combines the moral strength of civil society with state authority. Learning activities in these institutions not only provide education but also internalize national values, strengthen identity, and expand Indonesia's moral attraction at the grassroots level (Purba & Azizah, 2024; Annisa & Nizar, 2022).

This synergy is also evident in the process of forming a national identity among migrant children. Through learning the Indonesian language, history, and culture, migrant children not only gain knowledge but also build an emotional attachment to their homeland. They become "little diplomats" who represent a moderate and inclusive image of Indonesia in Malaysian society. Religious activities organized by NU and literacy and cadre development activities by Muhammadiyah play a role in strengthening Indonesia's image as a civilized and humanistic nation in the eyes of the regional public (Aqila, 2023; Abdullah, 2024; Moeis, 2025). Ultimately, the synergy between soft power and transnationalism in the context of NU and Muhammadiyah's social diplomacy shows that effective diplomacy does not have to go through formal state channels, but can be carried out by civil society that upholds humanitarian and national values. Through non-formal education, NU and Muhammadiyah have made social diplomacy a moral bond between Indonesia and Malaysia, as well as a concrete manifestation of Indonesia's civilizational leadership in Southeast Asia.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study shows that transnational social diplomacy carried out by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah through non-formal education for Indonesian migrant workers' children in Malaysia is a tangible form of synergy between soft power and transnationalism. Education not only functions as a medium for knowledge transfer, but also as an instrument of value diplomacy that presents Indonesia as a moderate, humanist, and civilized nation. NU and Muhammadiyah, as non-state actors, have succeeded in transforming Islamic and Indonesian national values into inclusive social practices across borders, strengthening Indonesia's moral attraction in

the Southeast Asian region. Through community-based education mechanisms such as Sanggar Bimbingan and Community Learning Centers (CLC), these two organizations fill the void left by the state in guaranteeing the right to education for migrant children, while expanding Indonesia's humanitarian diplomacy in a non-confrontational and sustainable manner.

Furthermore, the collaborative model between mass organizations, Indonesian diplomatic institutions, and local Malaysian communities shows that contemporary diplomacy is no longer hierarchical, but rather multi-layered governance that involves civil society as key actors. This synergy strengthens Indonesia's image as a constructive and empathetic regional partner on cross-border humanitarian issues. Thus, the transnational social diplomacy based on education carried out by NU and Muhammadiyah is not merely a philanthropic activity, but a moral geopolitical strategy that integrates values, social networks, and humanitarian action into a single praxis. This model can be used as a new paradigm in 21st-century diplomacy, where the strength of a nation is determined not only by hard power but also by its ability to build trust, solidarity, and universal humanitarian values through cross-border education

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