

# From International Protocol to Practice: Aceh's Holistic Response to Rohingya Refugees

## Abstract

This study draws on a qualitative investigation conducted in Aceh, Indonesia, between March and November 2024, with field data collected from 15 August to 2 September 2024. It explores the intersection between the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) framework and local wisdom in addressing the humanitarian needs of Rohingya refugees. The GPC framework – based on principles of participation, accountability, and empowerment – offers a structured model for coordinating international humanitarian responses. In Aceh, the global framework is enriched by the region's Islamic-rooted values and traditions of communal solidarity. Based on field interviews, focus group discussions, and institutional data, the study illustrates how local communities in Aceh have contextualized the GPC to their specific cultural context. The findings underscore the importance of cultural sensitivity, community engagement, and integrated protection strategies. This model demonstrates the potential for refugee responses that are globally informed, yet locally grounded, effective, and sustainable. By addressing a longstanding gap in refugee literature – namely, how global protection standards interact with culturally embedded systems – the study contributes to the development of humanitarian crisis management as a science. It also provides a contextual policy reference that may inform future national frameworks in Indonesia and the Southeast Asian region.

**KEYWORDS:** international law, Global Protection Cluster, local wisdom, Rohingya, humanitarian response, Aceh

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# 1 | Introduction

Still recovering from the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Aceh responded to the Rohingya refugee arrivals with compassion and hospitality. However, the scale and complexity of the crisis demanded innovative and comprehensive strategies to meet the multifaceted needs of the displaced population. In response to global displacement challenges, the international community established the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) as a mechanism to coordinate protection efforts for displaced persons. The GPC emphasizes partnerships among multilateral organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and government agencies to ensure holistic protection.

These developments underscore the growing relevance of global protection frameworks, particularly as states grapple with rising refugee flows in legally and politically complex environments<sup>[1]</sup>. As Hathaway<sup>[2]</sup> and McAdam<sup>[3]</sup> argue, refugee protection is increasingly shaped not only by binding conventions but also by transnational advocacy, soft law, and regional cooperation mechanisms. The Global Protection Cluster (GPC) and related tools developed by UNHCR have emerged as critical instruments in ensuring rights-based responses, even in states like Indonesia that have not formally acceded to the 1951 Convention. Thus, this study contributes to the literature on the localization of international norms, while also engaging global debates on the evolution of refugee protection mechanisms.

The Rohingya refugee crisis, rooted in systemic persecution in Myanmar, forms part of a larger pattern of protracted displacement across global conflict zones—including in Syria, Ukraine, Gaza, and Sudan—where millions face acute humanitarian risks. These crises highlight the urgent need for responsive, decentralized protection models within regions that are often left without formal legal instruments or robust international support.<sup>[4]</sup> Among the countries affected, Indonesia—particularly the

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Marcin Jarmoszka, “Kryzys migracyjny w kontekście unijnym a poszanowanie tożsamości narodowej państw członkowskich” *Prawo i Więż*, no. 6 (2024): 456-460. <https://doi.org/10.36128/PRIW.VI53.1156>.

<sup>2</sup> James C. Hathaway, *The Rights of Refugees under International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Jane McAdam, Tamara Wood, “The Concept of ‘International Protection’ in the Global Compacts on Refugees and Migration” *SSRN Scholarly Paper*, No. 3779077 (2021).

<sup>4</sup> Mohammad Fazlul Kader, Anwar Hossain Choudhury, “Historical Background of The Rohingya Refugee Crisis And The Implication Of Their Statelessness” *International Journal of Social Sciences and Economic Review*, No. 1 (2019): 8-15.

province of Aceh—has emerged as a critical transit and reception point.<sup>[5]</sup> However, responses within Indonesia have often been fragmented and lacked alignment with comprehensive international protection standards. Recognizing this gap, the GPC was introduced as a coordination framework to uphold the rights and dignity of displaced populations through structured, rights-based humanitarian action.

In Aceh, the implementation of the GPC intersects with a unique socio-cultural context shaped by Islamic values, customary law (*adat*), and indigenous wisdom traditions such as *Peusijek* and *Peumulia Jamee*. These local systems provide culturally embedded mechanisms for conflict resolution, social inclusion, and community resilience, which can either enhance or complicate the application of global humanitarian models. The convergence of international protocols and local practices thus presents both opportunities and challenges in refugee management. As of late 2024, Southeast Asia continues to experience large-scale refugee flows, particularly involving the stateless Rohingya population. The situation has placed significant humanitarian, political, and legal pressures on countries such as Bangladesh, Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia. This study responds to this ongoing regional migration phenomenon by examining how international norms can be meaningfully localized in the Indonesian context, with a specific focus on Aceh's culturally embedded response model.

The significance of this study lies in its ability to offer an empirically grounded, culturally contextualized model of refugee protection that operates effectively in the absence of formal international legal obligations. In doing so, it not only addresses an underexplored geographic context, but also provides practical insights into humanitarian localization—an increasingly important topic in international relations and humanitarian law.

To examine this interface, the present study employs a qualitative case study design informed by legal pluralism and the globalization of human rights. These perspectives provide a critical lens through which to understand the dynamic interplay between formal global protocols and local normative systems. This theoretical grounding allows us to move beyond descriptive analysis toward a more analytical understanding of normative contestation and adaptation.

The present study employs a qualitative case study design conducted from March to November 2024, with fieldwork undertaken between

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<sup>5</sup> Graham Thom, "The May 2015 Boat Crisis: The Rohingya in Aceh" *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, No. 2 (2016): 43-62.

August 15 and September 2, 2024. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observations across multiple refugee sites in Aceh. The research investigates how local communities and institutions have adapted the GPC model to reflect their sociocultural realities.

This study aims to address four interconnected research theses: First, that the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) framework, although internationally designed, can be culturally contextualized to fit Acehnese local wisdom. Second, that local traditions such as *Peusijek* and *Peumulia Jamee* are not merely symbolic but offer functional mechanisms for refugee protection. Third, that a harmonized model integrating international standards with local values leads to more sustainable and inclusive humanitarian outcomes. Fourth, that Aceh's experience can inform broader frameworks for refugee protection in culturally embedded societies beyond Indonesia.

This paper argues that integrating Acehnese local wisdom into the GPC framework significantly enhances refugee protection by ensuring both cultural resonance and sustainability. Through empirical fieldwork and theoretical insight, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on the localization of humanitarian aid, offering an adaptable model that bridges global standards with indigenous capacities.

## 2 | Method

This qualitative study was conducted between March and November 2024, with primary field data collected over a four-week period from August 15 to September 2, 2024. The research employed a combination of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and direct observation at various refugee shelters.

Interviews were conducted with key institutional stakeholders, including representatives from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), local government agencies such as the Aceh Social Services Unit and the Aceh Regional Disaster Management Agency (BPBA), as well as members of humanitarian NGOs operating in the region. Additionally, Rohingya refugees residing in shelters across North Aceh, Lhokseumawe, Pidie, and Greater Aceh participated in the study, through both structured interviews and informal discussions.

Secondary data were drawn from institutional reports, academic literature, news coverage, and publicly available documents. To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, data triangulation was employed by cross-verifying insights across multiple sources. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify recurring patterns and key themes in the empirical data, guided by a taxonomy designed to categorize refugee protection practices within the framework of the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) and Acehese local wisdom.

## 3 | Theoretical Framework

### 3.1. The Concept of Legal Protection

Legal protection theory emphasizes the role of law in safeguarding human dignity and mediating between individual and collective rights.<sup>[6]</sup> Within the Indonesian context, this is particularly relevant in areas such as child protection, environmental law, and indigenous land rights. In the context of international law, refugee protection is primarily governed by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, which define who qualifies as a refugee, the rights of displaced persons, and the obligations of host countries.<sup>[7]</sup> These instruments establish core principles, including non-refoulement,<sup>[8]</sup> the prohibition against returning individuals to countries where their lives or freedoms are at risks.<sup>[9]</sup>

The normative gap created by Indonesia's non-accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention does not negate the applicability of international protection standards. Jurisprudence from the European Court of Human Rights, such as *M.S.S. vs. Belgium and Greece* (2011), has emphasized that even non-signatory states are obligated to provide humane reception

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<sup>6</sup> Jane McAdam, Jane McAdam, *Complementary Protection in International Refugee Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Hathaway, *The Rights of Refugees under International Law*.

<sup>8</sup> *Hirsi Jamaa and Others vs. Italy*, No. 27765/09 (ECtHR [GC] 23 February 2012). <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre?i=001-109231>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ahani vs. Canada (Minister of Citizenship and Immigration)* - SCC Cases. <https://decisions.scc-csc.ca/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/item/1938/index.do>. [accessed: 7.7.2025].

conditions under customary international law. Likewise, UNHCR's 2007 Advisory Opinion on the Extraterritorial Application of Non-Refoulement Obligations clarifies that the principle of non-refoulement binds all states as part of customary law, regardless of treaty ratification.<sup>[10]</sup> These international legal developments are instructive for contexts like Indonesia, where *de facto* refugee protection is undertaken in the absence of formal legal recognition. Moreover, Human Rights Committee decisions such as *K.I.A. vs. Australia* (Comm. No. 1773/2008) have reaffirmed the importance of non-discriminatory treatment of refugees and access to education and legal remedies, reinforcing the relevance of soft law and international practice to Indonesia's humanitarian efforts.

However, Indonesia is not a party to either the 1951 Convention or its 1967 Protocol. This legal vacuum creates ambiguity in the rights and entitlements of refugees within Indonesian territory, leaving humanitarian protection to be managed through *ad hoc* mechanisms by international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Despite its non-signatory status, Indonesia has allowed the UNHCR to conduct Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedures and provide basic services under a memorandum of understanding. However, the operational reach of international organizations such as UNHCR and IOM is often constrained by their dependence on host-state cooperation and funding limitations. In some cases, their interventions, though well-intentioned, risk reinforcing humanitarian paternalism or sidelining local agency. This necessitates a critical reflection on how international protection mandates are balanced with community-led approaches.

The absence of formal refugee law in Indonesia has important implications: while the state may demonstrate hospitality and engage with humanitarian norms, the lack of codified protection leaves refugees vulnerable to inconsistent treatment, legal invisibility, and discretionary governance. Integrating international norms—even in a non-binding manner—into local practices can help fill this gap, as seen in the localized application of the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) principles in Aceh.

Hadjon's work on legal protection from state actions reinforces the importance of formal legal mechanisms to prevent abuse and uphold

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<sup>10</sup> Advisory Opinion on the Extraterritorial Application of Non-Refoulement Obligations under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and Its 1967 Protocol. UNHCR, 1 January 2011. <https://www.unhcr.org/media/advisory-opinion-extraterritorial-application-non-refoulement-obligations-under-1951-o>.

fundamental rights, even in informal or emergent humanitarian contexts. This conceptual lens is particularly relevant in Aceh, where refugee protection is delivered through culturally embedded yet informal mechanisms. By grounding the analysis in Hadjon's theory, the study illuminates how local initiatives, while commendable, require formalization to ensure consistency, legal certainty, and sustained protection. These perspectives are critical when considering the legal ambiguity surrounding refugee status in Indonesia and the absence of a dedicated refugee law.<sup>[11]</sup>

This study also draws upon the framework of legal pluralism, which recognizes the coexistence and interaction of multiple normative orders—state law, international legal instruments, religious law, and customary systems. In Aceh, refugee protection involves not only the operationalization of global humanitarian standards but also the invocation of adat, Islamic values, and local socio-religious norms. These layers reflect a plural legal order that challenges the universality and uniformity often assumed in international refugee law. Scholars such as Merry (1988) and Benda-Beckmann (2002) have emphasized that understanding how law operates “on the ground” requires attention to local legitimacy and cultural embeddedness.

The concept of legal protection is explored in various contexts of Indonesian law. From discussing the challenges in providing legal protection to child victims of severe abuse, to highlighting the need for better understanding and implementation of laws.<sup>[12]</sup> Ramelan delves into the complexities of holding corporations accountable in criminal law, emphasising the need for a solid understanding of legal theory and principles.<sup>[13]</sup> These studies underscore the importance of a robust legal framework and its practical implementation in ensuring legal protection for various groups in Indonesian society, including refugees.

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<sup>11</sup> Philipus M. Hadjon, *Perlindungan Hukum Bagi Rakyat Di Indonesia: Sebuah Studi Tentang Prinsip-Prinsipnya, Penanganannya Oleh Pengadilan Dalam Lingkungan Peradilan Umum Dan Pembentukan Peradilan Administrasi Negara*. Bina Ilmu, 1987; Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen, Nikolas Feith Tan, “The End of the Deterrence Paradigm? Future Directions for Global Refugee Policy” *SSRN Scholarly Paper*, No. 3877235 (2017).

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Tahir, M. Sobri Nursaptini, Setiani Novitasari, Ashar Pajarungi Anar, *Penguatan Muatan Lokal Seni Budaya Berbasis Local Genius Budaya Sasak Untuk Meningkatkan Literasi Budaya*, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Ramelan Ramelan, *Pertanggungjawaban Korporasi Dalam Hukum Pidana*, 2007. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Pertanggungjawaban-Korporasi-Dalam-Hukum-Pidana-Ramelan/01c4d18a8foccd027767293390eb954b229703ba>. [accessed: 4.2.2024].



Moreover, the study is situated within the broader discourse on the globalization of human rights, particularly the tensions between universal norms and local adaptations. As argued by An-Na'im (1990), the legitimacy and effectiveness of human rights frameworks depend on their compatibility with local cultural and religious systems. This is especially salient in Aceh, where Islamic teachings and communal traditions shape perceptions of rights, responsibility, and protection. By analyzing how GPC principles are localized through Acehnese mechanisms like Peusijuek and Peumulia Jamee, this study offers an empirical contribution to debates on vernacularization and the cross-cultural validity of human rights frameworks.

### 3.2. The Global Protection Cluster (GPC) Framework

The Global Protection Cluster (GPC) framework integrates human rights principles with legal frameworks and multi-sector coordination to enhance refugee assistance and social protection. This approach emphasizes the importance of recognizing and securing the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities in climate change mitigation efforts.<sup>[14]</sup> It advocates for participatory decision-making processes that involve displaced communities, ensuring culturally competent and responsive aid programs.<sup>[15]</sup> The human right-based approach to social protection is gaining traction in developing countries, with legal systems playing a crucial role in shaping reform processes.<sup>[16]</sup> However, implementation varies across jurisdictions, and formal participation of indigenous peoples and local communities in climate change initiatives remains limited in many cases.<sup>[17]</sup> Some countries, like Botswana, are exploring the adoption of human rights-based frameworks for social protection, though legal entrenchment is still lacking.

<sup>14</sup> Maria DiGiano, Claudia Stickler, Olivia David, "How Can Jurisdictional Approaches to Sustainability Protect and Enhance the Rights and Livelihoods of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities?" *Frontiers in Forests and Global Change*, 3 (2020).

<sup>15</sup> Malahayati Rahman, Laila M. Rasyid, Marlia Sastro, Agustia Rahmi, "Bridging Global Protocols and Local Wisdom: Innovating Refugee Assistance Through a Harmonized Protection Model" *Jambe Law Journal*, No. 1 (2024): 1.

<sup>16</sup> Kaltenborn Markus, "The Human Rights-Based Approach to Social Protection," [in:] *Social Protection in Developing Countries*, ed. Markus Kaltenborn, London: Routledge, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Kholisani Solo, Dolly Mogomotsi Ntseane, "Towards Adoption of a Human Rights Based Framework for Social Protection in Botswana" *Studies in Social Science Research*, No. 2 (2020): 2.



The GPC is a framework developed by the United Nations to enhance protection and assistance for vulnerable populations affected by conflict, natural disasters, and humanitarian crises.<sup>[18]</sup> It facilitates stakeholder engagement and coordination to protect refugees, conflict-affected people, and other vulnerable groups. The GPC is part of the UN's Humanitarian Cluster System, which protects and helps refugees and conflict victims.<sup>[19]</sup>

In this study, the GPC serves not just as a practical model for service delivery, but also as a lens for evaluating how international protection standards are translated into culturally appropriate interventions in Aceh. By integrating both legal theory and the operational standards of the GPC, this study provides a conceptual bridge between normative frameworks and on-the-ground humanitarian practices. The term “GPC framework” refers to the global coordination structure established by the UN, whereas “GPC model” is used to describe its localized implementation and adaptation in the Acehnese context.

### 3.3. Local Wisdom

Local wisdom, as both a cultural and geographic asset, plays a vital role in shaping community behavior, environmental stewardship, and social regulation.<sup>[20]</sup> In Aceh, traditions such as *Peusijek* – a ceremonial blessing rooted in Islamic teachings – and *Peumulia Jamee* – the custom of honoring guests—are central to the region's identity.<sup>[21]</sup> Integrating such practices into refugee protection frameworks enhances the acceptance and social integration of displaced persons, particularly within culturally cohesive societies like Aceh.

Local wisdom refers to the knowledge, values, and practices passed down through generations, embedded within the cultural and ecological fabric

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<sup>18</sup> I Made Ady Wirawan, “Kesehatan Pariwisata: Pendekatan Integratif Untuk Memperkuat Keamanan Kesehatan Global: Orasi Ilmiah”, 28 March 2022.

<sup>19</sup> UNHCR, Advisory Opinion on the Extraterritorial Application of Non-Refoulement Obligations under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and Its 1967 Protocol.

<sup>20</sup> Rinitami Njatrijani, “Kearifan Lokal Dalam Perspektif Budaya Kota Semarang” *Gema Keadilan*, No. 1 (2018): 16-31; Askodrina Hijriadi, “Penguatan Kecerdasan Perspektif Budaya Dan Kearifan Lokal” *Al-Ihda: Jurnal Pendidikan Dan Pemikiran*, No. 1 (2022): 619-623.

<sup>21</sup> Nana Noviana, “Integritas Kearifan Lokal Budaya Masyarakat Aceh Dalam Tradisi Peusijek” *DESKOVI: Art and Design Journal*, No. 1 (2019): 29.

of a specific community.<sup>[22]</sup> It encompasses a society's moral codes, conflict resolution practices, and communal responses to external challenges.<sup>[23]</sup> In the context of forced migration and humanitarian response, these traditions offer a complementary, often underutilized, layer of protection that resonates deeply with host communities.<sup>[24]</sup>

Multiple studies have explored how culturally embedded practices can support humanitarian aims. Rahman et al. argue that Acehese customs have fostered empathy and inclusion in local responses to Rohingya refugees, providing organic mechanisms for reception and adaptation.<sup>[25]</sup> Conversely, Thom warns of the limitations of informal and ad hoc approaches, stressing the need for formal, rights-based systems to ensure consistency and accountability in refugee protection.<sup>[26]</sup>

Moreover, the relevance of local wisdom extends beyond the humanitarian field. For example, local knowledge systems have enhanced environmental management in indigenous contexts, promoted ethical leadership, and even been integrated into educational paradigms to foster critical thinking and cultural literacy.<sup>[27]</sup> In regions such as Bontobahari, boat-making practices reflect the community's deep maritime culture, while in Sasak and Dayak communities, traditional values are being revitalized through arts, education, and environmental advocacy.<sup>[28]</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Sanyah Asiah, Hasanah Simanjuntak, Yuliza Chintia, "Local Wisdom Untuk Solusi Masyarakat Global: Local Wisdom for Global Society Solution" *Jurnal Riset Rumpun Ilmu Sosial, Politik Dan Humaniora*, No. 2 (2022): 72-77. <https://doi.org/10.55606/jurrish.vii2.151>.

<sup>23</sup> Wahyu, *Local Wisdom in Banjar Cultural Perspective*, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.210222.003>.

<sup>24</sup> Samsul Hidayat, "Implikasi Dan Konsekwensi Nilai-Nilai Local Wisdom (Kearifan Lokal) Dalam Kepemimpinan Di Era Globalisasi" *Jurnal Inovasi Penelitian*, No. 10 (2021): 2113. [accessed: 4.1.2024].

<sup>25</sup> Malahayati Rahman, Yulia Yulia, Mukhlis Mukhlis, "Refugee Settlement Based on Local Custom Values (Study of Rohingya Refugees in Aceh)" *Proceedings of Malikussaleh International Conference on Law, Legal Studies and Social Science (MICoLLS)*, 2 December (2022): 00048-00048; 1. Rahman, Rasyid, Sastro, Rahmi, "Bridging Global Protocols and Local Wisdom: Innovating Refugee Assistance Through a Harmonized Protection Model", 1.

<sup>26</sup> Thom, "The May 2015 Boat Crisis: The Rohingya in Aceh", 43-62.

<sup>27</sup> Tahir, Sobri, Nursaptini, Novitasari, Ashar Pajarungi Anar, *Penguatan Muatan Lokal Seni Budaya Berbasis Local Genius Budaya Sasak Untuk Meningkatkan Literasi Budaya*, 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Fitria Nugrah Madani, "Local Genius Tradisi Pembuatan Perahu Masyarakat Bontobahari Sebagai Spirit Kebudayaan Maritim Nusantara" *Jurnal Masyarakat Dan Budaya*, No. 3 (2022).

In the Indonesian context, *adat* (customary law) remains a powerful normative system, influencing everything from judicial ethics to land governance. National legislation, such as the Indonesian Environmental Law No. 32 of 2009, even recognizes local wisdom as a key principle in sustainable development.<sup>[29]</sup> Despite these formal recognitions, the practical incorporation of local wisdom into refugee policy and protection remains limited and inconsistent.

Indonesian culture draws on local wisdom, reflecting its diversity. It encompasses values, norms, ethics, beliefs, traditions, and special restrictions that have evolved and constitute a cultural advantage. Local understanding is needed to fight poverty and injustice. It can boost student learning in the curriculum.<sup>[30]</sup> The preservation and promotion of local wisdom are essential for maintaining the unique identities of different communities.<sup>[31]</sup> Applying local wisdom in character education can help instil important values such as honesty, independence, and social sensitivity.<sup>[32]</sup>

Local wisdom, deeply rooted in the culture and society that supports it, encompasses various aspects of human culture, including religious systems, language, economy, technology, education, social organisation, and the arts.<sup>[33]</sup> In Aceh, religious leaders, *meunasah* councils, and community elders play essential roles in resolving conflict, managing communal resources, and maintaining social harmony.<sup>[34]</sup> These structures provide promising avenues for enhancing refugee governance through culturally

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<sup>29</sup> W. Setiawan, *Kilas Balik Dan Perspektif Pemerintahan Daerah Di Indonesia*, 2020. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Kilas-Balik-dan-Perspektif-Pemerintahan-Daerah-di-Setiawan/f200bf8d9f139901625bdc230cbc76e2ba246bcb>. [accessed: 4.1.2024].

<sup>30</sup> Dian Bakhtiar, "Bahan Ajar Berbasis Kearifan Lokal Terintegrasi Stm (Sains, Teknologi, Dan Masyarakat) Pada Mata Pelajaran Fisika" *Jurnal Pembelajaran Fisika*, No. 5 (2016): 5. <https://jurnal.unej.ac.id/index.php/JPF/article/view/3712>. [accessed: 11.2.2024].

<sup>31</sup> Munir Salim, "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika Sebagai Perwujudan Ikatan Adat-Adat Masyarakat Adat Nusantara" *Al Daulah: Jurnal Hukum Pidana Dan Ketatanegaraan*, No. 1 (2017): 65-74.

<sup>32</sup> Melaningrum Andarwati, "Kearifan Lokal Masyarakat Malang Dalam Pendidikan Penguatan Karakter Di SMAN 1 Sumberpucung" *Jurnal Pendidikan Sejarah Indonesia*, No. 2 (2019): 141-152. <https://doi.org/10.17977/umo33v2i22019p141>.

<sup>33</sup> Amirullah Amirullah, Masri Ridwan, "Interpretasi Kawasan Adat Karampuang Kabupaten Sinjai Sebagai Suplemen Ajar Mata Kuliah Ragam Budaya Lokal" *Jurnal Praksis Dan Dedikasi Sosial (JPDS)*, No. 2 (2021): 69.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem.

grounded dialogue and decision-making.<sup>[35]</sup> The study finds that such mechanisms have already supported social cohesion in several refugee-hosting communities and could be further institutionalized within protection frameworks like the Global Protection Cluster (GPC).<sup>[36]</sup>

Local knowledge can be introduced by helping refugee families communicate with their neighbours and incorporating local values and religion. Training refugees in relevant skills, helping them find work, and contributing to the community can improve it. Aceh's protection mainstreaming technique can make Rohingya refugees feel more welcome by incorporating local wisdom. By centring culturally appropriate approaches, Aceh's experience demonstrates how local wisdom can move beyond symbolic hospitality to provide structural support for refugee protection. When effectively integrated with global humanitarian standards, such practices offer a scalable model that is both ethically grounded and operationally sustainable.

### 3.4. Rohingya in Aceh

Since November 2022, Indonesia has received the arrival of 5 ships carrying 644 Rohingya refugees in Aceh. The refugees are now being accommodated in three locations in Aceh, namely, Lhokseumawe, Pidie and Aceh Besar (Ladong), while 167 have spontaneously continued their journey. Rohingya refugees temporarily accommodated in the Mina Raya Building, Padang Tiji District, Pidie Regency, increased by 179 immigrants. This addition is due to the transfer of immigrants stranded in East Aceh Regency some time ago. So, the total number of immigrants in the Mina Raya Building as of 30 March 2024 has reached 277 people. Muslim, the Head of Pidie Social Service, added that the 179 Rohingya who landed and were accommodated from East Aceh consisted of 97 male refugees, 54 women, 20 boys and eight girls. They were transported using six buses belonging to the East Aceh Transportation Service. Rohingya refugees will also be transferred for those accommodated in UPTD Ladong Aceh Besar and Lhokseumawe City.

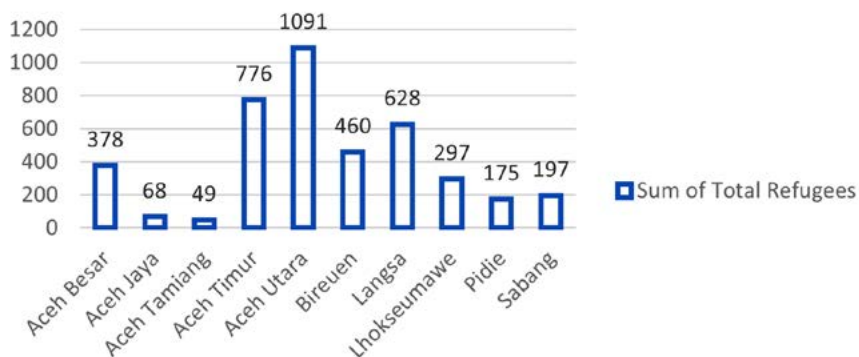
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<sup>35</sup> Yuliyanto Yuliyanto, "Peranan Hukum Adat Dalam Menyelesaikan Konflik Untuk Mewujudkan Keadilan Dan Kedamaian" *Jurnal Rechts Vinding: Media Pembinaan Hukum Nasional*, No. 1 (2017): 37.

<sup>36</sup> Rahman, Rasyid, Sastro, Rahmi, "Bridging Global Protocols and Local Wisdom: Innovating Refugee Assistance Through a Harmonized Protection Model", 1.

Based on data from Kontras Aceh and UNHCR Indonesia, from 2009 to 2024, ten regions in Aceh have accommodated Rohingya refugees, namely Aceh Besar, Aceh Jaya, Aceh Tamiang, East Aceh, North Aceh, Bireuen, Langsa, Lhokseumawe, and Sabang. If added up throughout 2009–2024, 4,119 Rohingya refugees landed in Aceh.

**Figure 1. Rohingya Refugee Data 2009–2024**



Sources: Data Processed from Kontras Aceh and UNHCR Indonesia

Since 2015, there have been 17 cases handled by the Aceh Regional Police and members of the Rohingya refugee ranks, namely human smuggling cases or immigration crimes, human trafficking crimes, and narcotics cases. In these cases, the police have named 32 people as suspects. The legal process for the cases was conducted until the completion of the trial.

The influx of Rohingya refugees in Aceh, Indonesia, has posed significant challenges for the government, particularly in the absence of a legal framework for refugee management.<sup>[37]</sup> It has led to a complex situation, with the government's response being influenced by the securitisation of migration theory.<sup>[38]</sup> Despite initial efforts to close the territory to refugees, the Indonesian government eventually accepted them with military

<sup>37</sup> Adwani Adwani, Rosmawati Rosmawati, M. Ya'kub Aiyub Kadir, "The Responsibility in Protecting the Rohingya Refugees in Aceh Province, Indonesia: An International Refugees Law Perspective" *IIUM Law Journal*, No. S2 (2021): 1-21.

<sup>38</sup> Hardi Alunaza, M. Kholit Juani, "Kebijakan Pemerintah Indonesia Melalui Sekuritisasi Migrasi Pengungsi Rohingya Di Aceh Tahun 2012–2015" *Indonesian Perspective*, No. 1 (2017): 1.

assistance.<sup>[39]</sup> However, implementing anti-trafficking legislation has been a challenge, as seen in the case of the Rohingya in Thailand.<sup>[40]</sup>

### 3.4.1. Lhokseumawe City and North Aceh Regency

Lhokseumawe City was involved in handling Rohingya refugees for the first time in 2020, when the refugees were stranded on Ujong Blang Beach after being tossed around in the ocean for approximately nine months in deplorable conditions. Their number is quite large, namely 297 people. They arrived in Lhokseumawe when the COVID-19 disaster hit, and for approximately two weeks, the refugees were required to undergo quarantine in the shelter provided in Gampong Meunasah Mee, Kandang.

Meanwhile, the North Aceh Regency area itself is the district that has accommodated the most Rohingya refugees so far. If added up, from 2012 to 2023, there were six landings with 1,091 refugees, among whom there were also several Bangladeshis. In 2022, they will land twice, just one day after the first boat arrives in Meunasah Lhok village, Muara Batu. Then, on 16 November 2022, 119 Rohingya refugees arrived in Bluka Tebai Village, Dewantara District, North Aceh. They were temporarily accommodated in the fishermen's hall of Bluka Tebai Village.

Based on information received by Amnesty Indonesia, residents have asked the authorities to relocate the refugees to permanent shelters immediately. On the evening of 24 November 2022, residents of Muara Batu District transported 110 Rohingya Refugees from the district office to the front of the North Aceh Regent's office. The refugees were planned to be taken to the former Immigration office building in Puenteut, Lhokseumawe, but it was cancelled due to resistance from the local community. On 25 November 2022, 110 refugees were still in the North Aceh Regional Disaster Management Agency (BPBD) office area opposite the North Aceh Regent's office.

Temporarily, Amnesty Indonesia also received information that 119 Rohingya refugees accommodated in the fishermen's hall of Bluka Tebai Village were given a deadline to be relocated no later than 25 November 2022. They were then moved to the Puenteut Immigration Office, Blang

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<sup>39</sup> Deasy Silvya Sari, "Indonesian Government Policy on Rohingya Refugees" *Andalas Journal of International Studies (AJIS)*, No. 1 (2018): 1.

<sup>40</sup> Supang Chantavanich, "Thailand's Challenges in Implementing Anti-Trafficking Legislation: The Case of the Rohingya" *Journal of Human Trafficking*, No. 2 (2020): 234-243.

Mangat District, Lhokseumawe City, previously used to accommodate Rohingya refugees. In December 2022, there was a protest by individuals who claimed to be village residents asking that they be moved because the residents claimed that Rohingya refugees were stealing coconuts and committing immoral acts in the shelter.

The situation of Rohingya refugees in Indonesia, particularly in Aceh, is a complex one, shaped by both international and domestic factors. The Indonesian government's policy towards Rohingya refugees has evolved, with initial reluctance giving way to a more open approach.<sup>[41]</sup> This shift is likely influenced by the ongoing human rights abuses against the Rohingya in Myanmar, which have been well-documented.<sup>[42]</sup> However, the influx of refugees has also challenged Indonesia's immigration policy and raised concerns among local communities.<sup>[43]</sup> These concerns are not unique to Indonesia, as other countries, such as Bangladesh, also grapple with the legal and policy issues surrounding the Rohingya refugee crisis.<sup>[44]</sup> The recent protests in Aceh, where residents have expressed dissatisfaction with the presence of Rohingya refugees, underscore the need for a comprehensive and sustainable solution to this humanitarian crisis.

### 3.4.2. Pidie Regency

Pidie Regency has received the arrival of Rohingya refugees twice, namely in 2022 and 2023, with a total of 175 refugees. From November 2022 to March 2023, as many as 895 Rohingya refugees entered Aceh. They are spread across Aceh Besar, Pidie, Lhokseumawe and East Aceh. After some time, as many as 185 refugees have been relocated to Pekanbaru, Riau, and the rest are currently still in Padang Tiji, Aceh, which are transfers from UPTD DINSOS Aceh, Ladong, Aceh Besar and Kuala Matang Pelawi, East Aceh.

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<sup>41</sup> Silvyia, "Indonesian Government Policy on Rohingya Refugees."

<sup>42</sup> William Schabas, Nancie Prudhomme, Joe Powderly, "Crimes against Humanity in Western Burma: The Situation of the Rohingyas" 1 May 2010. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Crimes-against-humanity-in-Western-Burma%3A-the-of-Schabas-Prudhomme/cc1b69fco6479ced8b219a9b1a8a6fd4837bf8e>. [accessed: 4.1.2024].

<sup>43</sup> Dian Wahyu Utami, Rahmat Saleh, Irin Oktafiani, "Indonesia's Constitutional Immigration Policy: A Case of Rohingya Ethnic Group Refugees" *Journal of Indonesian Social Sciences and Humanities*, No. 2 (2018): 119-132.

<sup>44</sup> Hassan Faruk Al Imran, Nannu Mian, "The Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: A Vulnerable Group in Law and Policy" *Journal of Studies in Social Sciences*, No. 2 (2014): 2. [accessed: 11.1.2024].



As of October 2023, 139 Rohingya refugees were placed in temporary shelters in the Mina Raya Building, Gampong Luen, Padang Tiji District, Pidie Regency. This number consisted of 57 females and 82 males. More details can be seen in the following table.

Table 1. Rohingya Refugee in the Pidie Regency (based on gender)

No.	Categories	Female	Male
1	Toddlers 0-5 years	5	9
2	Children 6-14 years	14	18
3	Teenagers 15-19 years	25	21
4	Adult	13	32
Total Refugees		57	82

Sources: Data processed from Kontras Aceh and UNHCR Indonesia

Camp Mina Raya’s security and living conditions in Pidie, Aceh, are relatively good, with direct security personnel from UNHCR and police involvement. However, the need for special attention to the sleeping quarters is noted, as the building has not been used for some time, and renovation is pending government approval. The communities in the surrounding areas, such as Gampong Nusa and Ajee Rayeuk, have been involved in waste management and goat farming, respectively, with the former turning waste into economic products.<sup>[45]</sup> The local community’s involvement in these activities is driven by personal motivation and the desire for a better environment. However, the lack of government support can hinder these efforts.

Apart from UNHCR and IOM, several humanitarian organisations help Rohingya refugees in Padang Tiji, such as the Indonesian Civil Humanitarian Foundation (YKMI), Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS), and the Geutanyoe Foundation (YG). Rohingya refugees can access various services at Camp Mina Raya easily, although the access that refugees should have is not entirely acceptable.

<sup>45</sup> Mahlil Mahlil, Mirja Mustaqim, Fatimah Fatimah, Muhammad Furqan, “Pengelolaan Sampah Berbasis Masyarakat Menjadi Produk Bernilai Ekonomi (Studi Di Gampong Nusa Kecamatan Lhoknga Kabupaten Aceh Besar)” *Jurnal Al-Ijtima’iyah*, No. 1 (2021): 65; Arman Sayuti, Budianto Panjaitan, S Syafruddin, et al., “Pemberdayaan Potensi Masyarakat Berbasis Peternakan Kambing Di Gampong Ajee Rayeuk Kabupaten Aceh Besar (Empowerment of Community Potential Based on Goat Farm in Ajee Rayeuk Village District of Aceh Besar)” *Buletin Pengabdian Bulletin of Community Services*, No. 1 (2021): 33-37.

They have been provided various educational and training activities such as capacity building and empowerment. Female refugees learn sewing and hairdressing, while male refugees learn barbering. These two activities are performed alternately every Tuesday to Saturday every week. Educational activities for children and teenagers were also carried out in a particular education room after ten children had attended SD Negeri Tanjung.<sup>[46]</sup> After access to formal education was temporarily suspended, refugee children currently receive access to informal education in the camp by bringing in teaching staff from outside. Apart from that, there are also several educational activities provided by humanitarian institutions in the Mina Raya camp.<sup>[47]</sup>

The sewing and barber training programme is only intended for refugees. There is no specific involvement of the Leun village community. Information dissemination in English, Rohingya, and Indonesian is provided in educational and training programmes with the aid of translators from the relevant communities. Rohingya refugees have also started to use empty land to grow vegetables such as pumpkin, mustard greens and eggplant. Gardening is an alternative activity for those who do not enjoy sewing or cutting hair. In terms of economic empowerment, so far, there has been no direct economic empowerment given to Rohingya refugees. However, some people from *Luen* village started selling inside Camp Mina Raya by opening a simple canteen.

### 3.4.3. Aceh Besar Regency

Aceh Besar Regency has received Rohingya refugees three times (2013, 2022 and 2023) with 378 people. Aceh Besar Regency has provided temporary shelter to Rohingya refugees on multiple occasions, the most recent instance being at UPTD DINSOS Aceh, Ladong, Aceh Besar. Rohingya refugees were relocated to Camp Mina Raya, Padang Tiji, Pidie Regency. The security at UPTD DINSOS Aceh is well-maintained, with separate accommodations for male and female refugees. However, the situation

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<sup>46</sup> Liputan6.com., "Keinginan Anak-anak Pengungsi Rohingya Sekolah di Aceh Kandas, Polisi Larang Mereka Keluar Kamp," 6 August 2023, <https://www.liputan6.com/regional/read/5362875/keinginan-anak-anak-pengungsi-rohingya-sekolah-di-aceh-kandas-polisi-larang-mereka-keluar-kamp>. [accessed: 11.1.2024].

<sup>47</sup> Agus Setyadi, *Pengungsi Rohingya di Pidie Diajari Bahasa Indonesia, Agama hingga Matematika detiksumut*. <https://www.detik.com/sumut/berita/d-7099307/pengungsi-rohingya-di-pidie-diajari-bahasa-indonesia-agama-hingga-matematika>. [accessed 11.1.2024].

of Rohingya refugee children in Bangladesh, including their health and educational status, is a cause for concern.<sup>[48]</sup> The treatment of Rohingya refugees in Aceh has been different from other asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia, raising questions about the motivations of those providing hospitality.<sup>[49]</sup> The comparative status of registered and newly arrived Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, particularly the conditions of women and girls, is an important consideration.<sup>[50]</sup>

3.4.4. Bireuen Regency

Throughout the history of Rohingya refugees landing in Aceh, Bireuen Regency has received their arrival five times, to be precise in 2011, 2018, 2021 (then taken to Lhokseumawe City), 2022 and 2023 with a total of 460 refugees. The total number of Rohingya refugees currently in Bireuen is 36 people, consisting of:

Table 2. Rohingya Refugee in Bireuen Regency (based on gender)

No.	Categories	Female	Male
1	Toddlers 0-5 years	4	4
2	Children 6-14 years	2	3
3	Teenagers 15-19 years	4	4
4	Adult	7	8
Total Refugees		17	19

Source: Data processed from Kontras Aceh and UNHCR Indonesia

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) plays a crucial role in determining refugee status and providing refugee protection and assistance.<sup>[51]</sup> In Indonesia, the UNHCR collaborates with

<sup>48</sup> Mahbub Alam Prodig, “Health and Educational Status of Rohingya Refugee Children in Bangladesh” *Journal of Population and Social Studies*, No. 2 (2017): 135-146.

<sup>49</sup> Antje Missbach, “Facets of Hospitality: Rohingya Refugees” Temporary Stay in Aceh” *Indonesia*, No. 1 (2017): 41-64.

<sup>50</sup> Shahnam Karin, Md. Arif Chowdhury, Ishrat Shamim, “Status of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh: A Comparative Study with Emphasis on Aspects of Women and Girls in Camps of Kutupalong, Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh” *OALib*, No. 1 (2020): 1-4.

<sup>51</sup> David Fernando, Razico P Putra, Satria Yulanda, “Kerjasama Direktorat Jenderal Imigrasi Dengan UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)” *Jurnal Sains Riset*, No. 1 (2021): 57-63.

other relevant organisations, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), to address refugee issues.<sup>[52]</sup> Using clustering methods, such as K-means, has been applied in various contexts, including the analysis of the human development index in Maluku<sup>[53]</sup> and the categorisation of slum settlements in Surabaya.<sup>[54]</sup> These studies show the importance of collaboration and data analysis in addressing humanitarian issues, including protecting refugees.

Based on a fact sheet from UNHCR Indonesia, as of July 2024, the total number of refugees from Myanmar in Indonesia is 879, spread across several provinces. Currently, Aceh is still hosting 173 Rohingya refugees in 2 temporary shelter locations, namely the Mina Raya Gampong Luen Building Padang Tiji District, Pidie Regency and the Bireuen Education Service SKB Building, Buket Teukueh, Kota Juang District, Bireun Regency.

The role of the UNHCR in assisting Rohingya refugees has been crucial, as highlighted in several studies. Syafrina<sup>[55]</sup> emphasises the organisation's role in providing protection, basic needs, and community empowerment. Aprinada<sup>[56]</sup> and Mumtazinur<sup>[57]</sup> further underscore the importance of UNHCR's work in specific refugee crises, such as those in Lebanon and Aceh, Indonesia. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the significant impact of UNHCR's efforts in addressing the needs of Rohingya refugees and other displaced populations.

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<sup>52</sup> Mohamad Rachman, Iqbal Jamilurir, "Kerjasama Indonesia Dengan Lembaga-Lembaga Terkait Dalam Penanganan Pengungsi" *Jurist-Diction*, No. 1 (2018): 263-285.

<sup>53</sup> Mozart W. Talakua, Zeth A. Leleury, A.W. Taluta, "Analisis Cluster Dengan Menggunakan Metode K-Means Untuk Pengelompokan Kabupaten/Kota Di Provinsi Maluku Berdasarkan Indikator Indeks Pembangunan Manusia Tahun 2014" *Barekeng: Jurnal Ilmu Matematika Dan Terapan*, No. 2 (2017): 119-128.

<sup>54</sup> Patrica Bela Barbara, Ema Umilia, "Clustering Permukiman Kumuh Di Kawasan Pusat Kota Surabaya" *Jurnal Teknik ITS*, (2014). <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Clustering-Permukiman-Kumuh-di-Kawasan-Pusat-Kota-Barbara-Umilia/eff3a69dfd6f5ad1b3839baf16624ffeca3029f4>. [accessed: 4.2.2024].

<sup>55</sup> Della Andini Syafrina, "Peran UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) Dalam Menangani Kasus Pengungsi Rohingya (Myanmar) Di Bangladesh Dan Thailand" 12 April 2016.

<sup>56</sup> Putra Aprinanda, "Peranan United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Dalam Menangani Pengungsi Asal Suriah Di Lebanon" 13 October 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Mumtazinur Mumtazinur, "Pengaruh Bantuan Kemanusiaan Aceh bagi Pengungsi Rohingnya Terhadap Upaya Diplomasi Kemanusiaan" *Media Syari'ah: Wahana Kajian Hukum Islam dan Pranata Sosial*, No. 1 (2020): 1.

The UNHCR plays an essential role in addressing the Rohingya refugee crisis in the Asia Pacific region, particularly in Bangladesh and Thailand. The organisation provides a range of programmes and services, including protection, basic needs, and community empowerment, to support the refugees. However, the crisis is complex, with the refugees facing challenges such as limited opportunities and increasing uncertainty in the camps. The UNHCR's role in addressing the crisis is further complicated by some individuals' misuse of refugee status, leading to legal actions.<sup>[58]</sup> The crisis is rooted in ethnic conflict and has led to the international community's involvement, including changes in refugee policies.

The situation of Rohingya refugees in Indonesia, who make up 8% of the total refugee population, is a pressing issue that requires a collective response and burden-sharing among Asia Pacific countries.<sup>[59]</sup> The plight of these refugees is further exacerbated by the challenges faced by Indonesian fishermen, who struggle with poverty and fluctuating incomes due to unpredictable fishing seasons.<sup>[60]</sup> Despite not being legally obligated to do so, Indonesia has played a significant role in assisting Rohingya refugees in line with international norms and humanitarian principles.<sup>[61]</sup> However, there is a call for Indonesia to advocate for the independence of the Rohingya people and their recognition as a separate nation.<sup>[62]</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Muhammad Alvi Syahrin, "Perlindungan Terhadap Pencari Suaka Dan Pengungsi Menurut Hukum Islam Dan Hukum Internasional (Studi Filosofis Dan Ontologis Keilmuan)" *Nurani: Jurnal Kajian Syari'ah Dan Masyarakat*, No. 1 (2019): 63-76.

<sup>59</sup> Endang Retnowati, "Nelayan Indonesia Dalam Pusaran Kemiskinan Struktural (Perspektif Sosial, Ekonomi Dan Hukum)" *Perspektif*, No. 3 (2011): 149.

<sup>60</sup> Rudi Abdullah, L.M. Gunawan, Rifal Buton et al., "Edukasi Penangkapan Ikan Dengan Pemanfaatan Teknologi Apolo Dalam Upaya Pemberdayaan Masyarakat Bajo Lasalimu Kabupaten Buton Sulawesi Tenggara" *Community Development Journal: Jurnal Pengabdian Masyarakat*, No. 2 (2021): 278-281.

<sup>61</sup> Khairunnisa Simbolon, "Sikap Thailand Dan Indonesia Terhadap Pengungsi Rohingya Dalam Pendekatan Konstruktivis" *Jurnal PIR: Power in International Relations*, No. 1 (2018): 37.

<sup>62</sup> Arjuna Al Ichsan Siregar, Muhammad Endriyo Susila, Indra Firmansyah, "Keadilan Restoratif Sebagai Upaya Penguatan Sistem Penegakan Hukum Terhadap Pelaku Penyelundupan Pengungsi" *Jurnal Hukum IUS QUIA IUSTUM*, No. 3 (2022): 3.

## 4 | Result and Discussion

This section presents the findings of qualitative fieldwork conducted from August 15 to September 2, 2024, across Rohingya refugee shelters in Aceh Province. Drawing on structured interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observation, the study identifies how the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) framework has been adopted and reinterpreted through Aceh's unique socio-cultural and religious context. Analysis is structured around the GPC's four key pillars: (1) safety and dignity, (2) meaningful access, (3) accountability, and (4) participation and empowerment.

## 5 | Protection of Safety and Dignity

The GPC underscores the right of refugees to live in safety and dignity, free from harm, discrimination, and abuse. In Aceh, this principle is only partially realized. Field observations at Camp Mina Raya (Pidie) and UPTD DINSOS Ladong (Aceh Besar) confirmed that infrastructure measures—such as gender-segregated accommodations and on-site security provided by UNHCR and local police—have contributed to a general sense of physical safety among residents.

However, the dimension of dignity remains unevenly applied. Several incidents of stigmatization were reported in Lhokseumawe and North Aceh, where segments of the host community protested the presence of refugees, citing concerns over criminal behavior. In contrast, cultural practices such as *Peumulia Jamee* (honoring guests) and *Peusijek* (ritual blessing) have been effectively employed in some communities to foster mutual respect and social harmony. These findings highlight the complex role of culture as both an enabler and a constraint and point to the need for formalizing integration rituals within protection frameworks.

## 6 | Meaningful Access to Services

The GPC advocates for equitable and meaningful access to essential services for all refugees, without discrimination. In Aceh, however, access to services varies widely across districts and facilities. For instance, children in Padang Tiji (Pidie) were initially integrated into local formal education systems, but this access was later revoked due to administrative and security concerns. Currently, informal education is provided on-site through partnerships with humanitarian organizations, yet it suffers from a lack of curriculum standardization and long-term continuity.

Adult refugees have access to vocational training programs such as sewing and barbering. However, these programs are conducted in isolation from the host communities, limiting opportunities for economic integration and social inclusion. Although basic healthcare and food assistance are generally available, other services – such as legal aid and language instruction – remain underdeveloped. Communication barriers and bureaucratic opacity further hinder the refugees' ability to fully engage with the support systems available to them.

These observations indicate that access is not only a matter of physical provision, but also of functionality and usability—elements that require significant improvement in several sites.

## 7 | Accountability Mechanisms

Accountability, as defined in the GPC framework, entails the responsibility of institutions and actors to uphold refugee rights and address grievances through transparent mechanisms. In Aceh, the implementation of accountability is inconsistent and largely dependent on institutional capacity at the local level.

Interviews with humanitarian workers and government officials revealed a notable absence of standardized grievance procedures. Refugees lack access to clear channels for reporting issues related to shelter conditions, service denial, or incidents of discrimination. While international actors such as UNHCR and IOM provide some oversight, coordination with local authorities is often limited, and protection outcomes are not systematically monitored or evaluated. Moreover, the centralized operational structure



of these agencies sometimes results in a top-down approach that may unintentionally overlook local knowledge systems and context-specific needs. A more inclusive model of shared governance—one that values local perspectives alongside global standards—could mitigate such gaps and enhance legitimacy on the ground.

Some district governments face logistical and financial constraints that further impede the effective fulfilment of their protection mandates. This gap in accountability exposes refugees to institutional neglect and weakens trust in both national and international actors. Establishing a co-managed monitoring and grievance system—led jointly by government agencies, NGOs, and refugee representatives—would enhance transparency, trust, and rights enforcement.

## 8 | Participation and Empowerment

A central tenet of the GPC is that refugees should be active participants in decisions affecting their lives. However, in Aceh, refugee participation remains peripheral and largely symbolic. Across multiple sites, refugees expressed feelings of dependency and disempowerment, often perceiving themselves as passive recipients of aid rather than agents of their own futures. Nonetheless, isolated examples of refugee agency emerged during fieldwork. These include self-organized activities such as gardening, informal peer leadership structures within camps, and ad hoc collaboration with NGOs. However, such efforts are sporadic and rarely institutionalized or scaled.

Aceh's communal and religious traditions offer untapped potential for integrating refugee voices. Structures such as the *meunasah* (village hall) and networks of religious leaders could serve as culturally grounded platforms for participatory governance. Yet, these have not been systematically leveraged. The findings suggest that building participatory structures rooted in local institutions – rather than relying solely on top-down NGO processes – could foster more authentic and sustainable refugee empowerment.

## 9 | Implementation Challenges

Despite the promise of the GPC framework and the cultural richness of Aceh, several systemic and contextual challenges hinder the full realization of effective refugee protection:

### a. Legal vacuum

Indonesia's non-accession to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol creates a significant normative gap. While Presidential Regulation No. 125/2016 outlines administrative procedures for managing foreign refugees, it does not offer legal status, durable solutions, or enforceable rights. As a result, protection efforts rely on informal mechanisms and humanitarian discretion rather than statutory obligation. This legal ambiguity limits the capacity of both government and non-governmental actors to implement rights-based approaches consistently.

### b. Community resistance

In districts such as North Aceh, resistance from host communities has posed a challenge to refugee integration. Concerns over public safety, perceived moral transgressions, and economic burden have sparked protests and calls for relocation. The lack of transparent communication and participatory planning has exacerbated local resentment, underscoring the need for community engagement and trust-building in future humanitarian planning.

### c. Resource constraints

Local governments often operate with limited financial and human resources, which affects their ability to provide essential services or coordinate protection efforts effectively. This reliance on external humanitarian agencies leads to inconsistent service delivery and undermines the sustainability of interventions. Pidie and Lhokseumawe, in particular, have reported logistical challenges in maintaining adequate shelter conditions, food distribution, and education access.

#### d. Disjointed governance

The fragmentation of responsibilities among various actors—including national ministries, local agencies, and international NGOs—has resulted in incoherent and often duplicative protection strategies. The absence of a unified coordination body has further complicated policy implementation and contributed to disparities in refugee experiences across districts. The absence of formal legal frameworks can, to some extent, be mitigated by adherence to soft law principles and regional cooperation. Instruments such as the UNHCR's Agenda for Protection and Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement have informed humanitarian responses in states with similar legal vacuums. In the ASEAN region, despite the lack of a binding refugee protection regime, declarations such as the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration have helped raise normative awareness.<sup>[63]</sup> For example, Malaysia and Thailand, although also non-signatories to the 1951 Convention, have developed ad hoc protection arrangements informed by soft law. Lessons from these jurisdictions can support Indonesia's efforts to institutionalize localized practices like those observed in Aceh.

These challenges point to the critical need for institutional reform, legal codification, and local capacity-building. The Aceh experience illustrates that while cultural values and community goodwill are powerful enablers, they must be supported by formal structures and sustainable policy frameworks to be truly effective.

## 10 | Conclusion

Given the ongoing and unresolved nature of the Rohingya refugee crisis in Southeast Asia, the findings of this study are both timely and urgent. They reflect not only a historical account of past responses but also a living model that is actively evolving to meet new humanitarian and socio-political challenges in the region. This study examined the intersection between

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<sup>63</sup> ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, 19 November 2012, <https://asean.org/asean-human-rights-declaration/>; ASEAN Declaration on the Rights of Children in the Context of Migration, 2 November 2019, <https://asean.org/asean-declaration-on-the-rights-of-children-in-the-context-of-migration/>.

the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) framework and local wisdom in Aceh as a model for addressing the humanitarian needs of Rohingya refugees. Based on fieldwork conducted from August 15 to September 2, 2024, the analysis demonstrates how global protection principles can be meaningfully adapted to local cultural contexts.

In a time of mounting global displacement due to armed conflict and climate instability, the relevance of adaptive, community-based humanitarian responses such as Aceh's is more critical than ever. This study adds value to global policy discourses on how localized, culturally integrated strategies can operate effectively even in legal grey zones, offering replicable lessons for other regions experiencing similar humanitarian pressures.

Findings reveal that while the core GPC pillars—safety and dignity, meaningful access, accountability, and participation—are partially implemented, their application is uneven and highly context-dependent. Acehnese customs such as *Peumulia Jamee* and *Peusijuek* have positively contributed to social inclusion and protection, yet remain informal and inconsistently applied.

The absence of a national legal framework for refugee protection in Indonesia remains the most significant barrier to effective, rights-based governance. Without legal codification, protection efforts remain ad hoc, reliant on discretionary goodwill, and vulnerable to political shifts. The institutionalization of local wisdom within a codified legal framework, harmonized with international standards, would allow Indonesia—and Aceh in particular—to move from humanitarian reaction to structured protection.

Ultimately, Aceh presents a compelling example of culturally embedded humanitarian response. While it cannot substitute for legal accountability, it illustrates how local wisdom can serve as a foundation for protection, dignity, and sustainable coexistence—provided it is embedded within a formal, rights-based framework. The study's findings not only offer practical lessons for humanitarian agencies but also lay the groundwork for an integrated policy model that leverages local values in global protection frameworks. This contribution may serve as a replicable example for crisis-prone regions seeking to localize international humanitarian norms without compromising core rights principles.

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