

# MALYSIAN HUMANITARIAN NGOs' INVOLVEMENT IN SYRIAN REFUGEES PROJECTS: CURRENT STATE OF COOPERATION INITIATIVES

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**Abstract:** *Cooperation forms a strong pillar in current development partnership policy. However, the current commitments to some cooperation initiatives are more tokenistic in nature. This study explores the current states of cooperation initiatives among humanitarian NGOs in Malaysia and to uncover the factors influencing cooperation initiatives while conducting Syrian refugees' projects. This study adopts qualitative design using standardized open-ended interviews with 10 key informants from humanitarian NGOs in Malaysia, specifically located in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor states. Majority of the key informants perceives that the current state of cooperation initiatives to be at average level because cooperation does exist in some of short-term projects, but not in the long sustainable projects. Contrary, several others mentioned that lacks of coordination, different interest of different NGOs, gaps of understanding between well-established and newly-established NGOs, as well as generation gap among NGOs' workers are the reasons of why cooperation initiatives did not achieve satisfactory states. The results support the Theory of Collaborative Advantage that humanitarian NGOs' cooperation is influenced by sharing resources, security and safety, as well as marketing hook. Further, the existence of political orientation effects is able to increase the capacity of the NGOs to maximize its ability to attract donors in contributing donation for Syrian crisis. Perhaps, the Malaysian NGOs players were encouraged to re-focus their direction towards humanity, practice humility and confidence, design plans and strategies, established NGOs union, as well as a specialised platform as part of efforts to stimulate cooperative initiatives among the humanitarian NGOs in Malaysia.*

**Keywords:** *Cooperation Initiatives, Humanitarian Aid, Humanitarian NGOs, Syrian Refugees.*

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## Introduction

The conflict in Syria between the government of Bashar al-Assad and various other forces, which started in the spring of 2011, continues to cause displacement within the country and across the region. The heavy years of war have devastated the country's critical public infrastructure and services. According to WHO recent report, an estimated 7.6 million people

were internally displaced and 5.6 million Syrians have become refugees, mostly in neighbouring countries (WHO, 2021). In year 2021, the number of registered refugees recorded by the Office of the UNHCR stands at 5.6 million, with just under half a million of these being resident in camps (Braithwaite et al., 2022). As a result, one in six people in Lebanon is a refugee, the highest proportion of refugees to host population in the world. In Jordan, one of every 14 people is a refugee, whereas Turkey hosts 3.5 million people, the largest absolute number of refugees in the world (UNHCR, 2018).

Previous studies indicate that cooperation between NGOs is crucial for successfully performing disaster management (Lattimer, 2016; Salem et al., 2019). In a dynamic and highly uncertain environment, enhancing the collaboration among the disaster relief workers holds great promise in terms of resolving issues that may hinder disaster relief workers' abilities to productively share their strategic resources in the form of activities and information (Prasanna & Haavisto, 2018; Dwivedi et al., 2018). Malaysian humanitarian NGOs actively ease the suffering of the Syrian refugees. For instance, World Vision Malaysia has helped over 2.37 million refugees, displaced people, and vulnerable host community members. Currently, there are ten Malaysian humanitarian NGOs have been helping the Syrian refugees such as Majlis Perundingan Pertubuhan Islam Malaysia (MAPIM), Global Peace Mission Malaysia (GPMM), Malaysia for Syria, and others. Among other supports provided are food assistance, emergency supplies, water and sanitation, health, education and child protection interventions reached children and families in need (World Vision Malaysia, 2020). Malaysian Life Lines for Syria (MLLFS) have so far built two schools, four field hospitals, four clean water wells, a bread factory, two water tanks, as well as providing supplies of food and clothes in Syria (Al-Gudari, 2019).

Cooperation partnerships in humanitarian assistance, however, fall short all too often, especially when one partner has power over the other. The humanitarian aid distribution by Malaysian NGOs facing several weaknesses such as cases of food supply redundancy, uneven distribution of food supply to disaster victims, food insecurity issues, and volunteers' redundancy during and post disasters (Mohd Rodzi et al., 2016). A study conducted by Mohd et al. (2018) revealed that there are no SOPs to explain the roles and responsibilities of humanitarian NGOs that can be used to coordinate NGOs' contributions to a supporting team. These issues could have significant effects on the humanitarian aid distribution process and on the Syrian crisis victims. Recently, Nazri et al. (2022) asserted that it is time for Malaysian NGOs to undergo an organisational transformation to expand their endeavor to provide more holistically for refugee communities. They proposed that networking between these NGOs is vital in ensuring that humanitarian aid is distributed more systematically and less haphazardly. However, question arises as why do NGOs cooperate with some of their counterparts in the humanitarian field and keep some others at arm's length? This study aims to identify the current state of cooperation and to investigate the factors influencing inter-agency cooperation in conducting Syrian refugees' projects among NGOs in Malaysia.

## Literature Review

### Role of Humanitarian NGOs

NGOs have played an important role in the community for decades. They were significantly contributed to restoration of emergencies areas or vulnerable conditions, and also actively participated together with many nation states and international agencies in doing so through global developmental programmes. In considerate with an increase in frequency and impact of global disasters (Thomas & López, 2015), several NGOs have been called to ease the burdens

of disasters' victims. NGOs are one of the critical actors to deliver the right humanitarian assistance to the right people at the right place quickly to alleviate unnecessary distress (Shareef et al., 2019). This is particularly important for the survival of displaced persons and communities.

Humanitarian NGOs are now an integral part of the international aid system which extends worldwide and is deployed more or less intensively, depending on the crisis zones (Naseh et al., 2022). Although the degree of their involvement varies, an analysis of their positioning reveals a sophisticated system of interaction and partnerships with the other main protagonists, be they big public sponsors, the UN agencies or states (Cusumano, 2021). Besides, NGOs are commonly considered as independent agencies in peace operations because they are not part of the military structure (Elkahlout et al., 2022). Normally, however, the NGO personnel work alongside the official, military and civilian, personnel of the peace missions but to assist local parties in fields like promoting human security, strengthening the rule of law, and economic and social development (Onur Bahcecik & Turhan, 2022).

### **Cooperation among Humanitarian NGOs**

The literature on humanitarianism at large has dedicated sparse attention to cooperation between NGOs. This area has becoming a new paradigm of international cooperation due to the overlapping of international regimes and increasingly complicated global issues. Studying cooperation in humanitarian aid management is important since disasters have an impact on infrastructure (Suppasri et al., 2021), poverty, urbanisation, vulnerability, and other factors (Liu & Balk, 2020).

Inter-organisational cooperation refers to a process where two or more independent organisations share resources (such as information, expertise, and infrastructure) or work closely to design and implement their operations (Moshtari, 2016). While Opdyke et al. (2017) referred inter-organisational coordination as the efforts in aligning organisations' tasks or actions to achieve cooperatively specified goals. On the other hand, Kalkman and de Waard (2017) suggested that inter-organisational cooperation refers to setting collaboration goals and negotiating and deciding on the number of resources (e.g., information, manpower, expertise, and others). Thus, it can be understood that "a cooperation perspective" deals with agreements on frameworks and policies between the various stakeholders.

Cooperation may occur over one or more tasks within a humanitarian assistance project by providing complementary rather than identical activities, for example, information sharing, context and capacity analysis, needs assessment, resource mobilization, transportation, or resource delivery (Dubey et al., 2021). Nevertheless, NGOs usually face challenges when collaborating with their partners. Part of these challenges comes from the diversity of partners' characteristics. Each NGO has its own mission, values, routines, and approach to conducting its operations. In addition, each NGO has its specific resources, international and local network, or working experience. These differences between NGOs combined with the difficulties inherent in operating a humanitarian project, makes cooperation more arduous (Moshtari & Vanpoucke, 2021). In this context, looking for a proper partner is a challenging task. Petrudi et al. (2020) proposed that when there is a diversity between NGOs' characteristics (such as goals and motivations), the success of cooperation initiatives depends on the NGOs' level of understanding about each other's objectives, operations, and values.

## Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative design using semi-structure interview as cooperation initiatives is a phenomenon, which cannot be quantified (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative research approaches are social or organisational behaviour research approaches that produce results that are not obtain via statistical procedures or other quantification approaches (Naoum, 2019). Creswell and Poth (2017) described qualitative research technique as a process where the research problem is studied in its natural setting rather than having subjects studied in a laboratory. It is subjective in nature and its meaning and experiences always described verbally (Venkatesh et al., 2016).

## Data Collection Procedure

The population of this study is personnel worked with humanitarian NGOs in Malaysia specifically in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor states. There are ten (10) personnel were chosen which consists of Manager or Head of Project who are directly involved in the Syrian refugees' projects. To ensure the anonymous of key informants, they will be informed that the coding component will be utilized and they were named uniquely as indicated by "key informant 1, 2, 3, and so on..."

The data in this study is obtained through semi-structure interview which gives opportunity to the key informants to provide information that do not restrict the participants' opinion. The interview protocol included seven open-ended questions. All key informants were given the transcripts shortly after the interview for review purposes, which contributed to the verification of the accuracy of the transcripts (Hagens et al., 2009). This study employed an inductive approach to find patterns throughout the interview transcripts. It used a manual open coding process (Yin, 2015), in an iterative analysis approach, in order to categorize and understand the raw data. This resulted in an initial list of themes and patterns (McKim, 2017). This study then performed a series of axial coding, in order to interconnect and link the previous categories of themes, unravelling the causal links between them.

## Findings and Discussion

This section aims to address the current state of cooperation and to identify the factors influencing inter-agency cooperation in conducting Syrian refugees' projects among NGOs in Malaysia. It is started by a discussion on the current state of cooperation initiatives among NGOs. Further, this section also specifically identifies the factors influencing inter-agencies cooperation among Malaysian humanitarian NGOs in conducting Syrian refugees' projects.

### Current State of Cooperation among NGOs in Malaysia

Majority of the key informants believed that cooperation initiatives among NGOs in Malaysia is at an average level and need lots of cooperation improvement (KI5, KI6, KI8, and KI9). The reason is perhaps the different views between short-term and long-term cooperation initiatives whereby one of the key informants mentions that a person can find a certain level of cooperation among NGOs in some of short-term projects, but not in the long sustainable projects. The KI3 elaborated further as follow.

"...most of us right now only work or cooperate with each other in one-off projects. But now, we need to look forward to the future of refugees. That's why I said we need to focus more on sustainability projects."

Key Informant 3

Since the disaster happened in a long time, therefore the humanitarian NGOs need to prepare crisis plan to identify partners, channels of communication and responsibilities in the face of large inflows of people seeking protection. Even though cooperation for long-term sustainable humanitarian assistance project is obviously difficult to achieve, but this type of cooperation has become the priority of the UN system in the context of launching the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in 2015. The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) has also recommended to strengthen collaboration, coherence and complementarity among humanitarian, development and peace actors.

Contrary, three of the key informants mentioned that they are satisfied with the current state of cooperation among NGOs (KI1, KI2, and KI7). The KI1 opined that the cooperation is well established especially when any of the NGO proposing any kind of humanitarian projects. Cooperatives do appear from the early phase of humanitarian projects especially in term of collecting the donation, making a plan and strategies, as well as preparing for the logistics. The better coordination of responses through cooperation initiatives has helped the NGOs to resolve situations of risk faced by refugees.

On the other hand, the other three key informants mentioned that they are not satisfied with the current state of cooperation among NGOs in Malaysia (KI3, KI4, and KI10). The KI4 stresses that:

“I would say the cooperation are still at the low level, especially in combining the effort to help the refugee in Syria.”

Key Informant 4

These key informants reveals that it is not easy to cooperate among humanitarian NGOs due to different interests by different NGOs (KI3, KI4, and KI10). The KI10 further elaborates that implementing the cooperation works are rather difficult than planning. He said as follow:

“I think the intention is there, but in terms of making that intention implemented, it’s somehow rather difficult. Many NGOs don’t have a very specific objective towards certain issues. So, it’s not easy.”

Key Informant 10

The KI2 contended that the gap of understanding between the big NGOs which were earlier established and the new small NGOs which were recently established is another reason why cooperation among Malaysian humanitarian NGOs is not that easy to be established among them. Overall, working and cooperating more closely with a wide variety of stakeholders involved in the integration of Syrian refugees is a must, including civil society, social partners, NGOs, and international bodies at the sub-national level. In particular, each NGO have a key role to play, while coordination of national and local governments is necessary to improve humanitarian assistance, especially when Syrian refugees requesting protection are dispersed by central authorities to sub-national regions.

### **Factors Influencing Cooperation among NGOs in Malaysia**

This section aims to identify the factors influencing inter-NGOs cooperation among humanitarian NGOs in Malaysia. Figure 1 depicts that there are four main factors that influence inter-NGOs cooperation and it can be categorised as political orientation effects, sharing resources, security and safety, and marketing hook.



**Figure 1: Factors Influencing Cooperation Initiatives among Humanitarian NGOs**

### **Political Orientation Effects**

The result reveals that four key informants (KI1, KI2, KI3, and KI4) perceive political orientation as something that can be used in a positive way by the humanitarian NGOs to benefit themselves. According to them, political party or politicians attach with them carry huge influence, and therefore the NGO can exploit it for the purpose to get more donations from different high-status people since these socialites like to associate themselves with the politicians. Donors also may be interested in contributing to high-quality or legitimate NGOs. However, at the time of a donation, they do not have complete information about a non-profit's quality or legitimacy since they are unable to directly observe these characteristics. Therefore, NGOs may develop signals in order to be perceived as legitimate and trustworthy to various stakeholder groups, especially donors. As one potential signal of an NGO's legitimacy, NGOs use relationships with political party or politician in order to obtain future economic or political benefits and subsequently may help alter the perceptions donors have about NGOs. Likewise, donors may contribute more to politically connected NGOs in order to build their own political connection as described by the KI1.

“It's true. Because of our donor's background, or the public background, they also have their own political orientations and everything. For us, we will try our best to avoid any political orientations, to be more neutral, and not to show our political orientation side.”

Key Informant 1

Similarly, the KI3 agreed that some of the political orientations have positive impact to the NGOs by causing positive attraction to certain group of people to donate to the good cause carried out by the NGO. Donors may use the political connection an NGO receives as a signal of an NGO's legitimacy, and increase their donations to these NGOs because they have more certainty their donations will be used for intended purposes. Consistently, the KI4 agreed that many NGOs intentionally blur the line between sectors so that it is difficult to distinguish between the political connection and an NGO. However, he admitted that instead of donors need a great deal of information, familiarity can be gained in the shorthand form of similar identity and political solidarity. Where donors feel an ideological or solidarity connection with the NGO, they are likely to consider the NGO to be more trustworthy, absent any other information to the contrary, at an earlier stage than would otherwise be expected.

Unfortunately, four key informants (KI7, KI8, KI9, and KI10) have different opinion whereby they mentioned that political orientation might negatively influence the work of the NGOs. They admitted that there is an existence of political influence in the humanitarian work which is carried out by NGOs in Malaysia. Because of the significant impact of political party's funding have on NPOs (Smith & Grønbjerg, 2018), NGOs often seek to form linkages with the politician to reduce uncertainty and improve performance. This political connection has an impact on NGOs and they are not easy to avoid them as explained by the following key informants.

“Yes, it is affecting, also the ideology of the political parties in Malaysia are very strong.”

Key Informant 8

“We don't want people to see us biased to one specific political party; it may lead to the stigma and what not.”

Key Informant 9

The KI8 proposed that NGOs affiliated with any political party would not present a positive image to the public. Some of the donors become worried when they see NGO associated itself with any political party, because it can be questioned if the money that they are going to donate will it be used for humanitarian work or for the activities of the political party. Therefore, it is essential for the NGO to avoid any kind of influence from the political parties, in order to save guard its reputation and be able to gain the trust from different donors as explained by the KI8.

“Maybe if you have a donation from the public, they want to know where the money goes to political activities or to humanitarian cause... so the NGO must be free from any political entities especially in Malaysia it must be seen freed from any ideologies.”

Key Informant 8

Too much dependent on political party or politician is dangerous as it might affect NGOs survivability in the sense that the dissolution of political party will end up stop NGOs humanitarian works. In addition, numerous people are reluctant to donate due to political reason, and that's why the best is for NGOs not to associate itself with any political party, and choose to remain as politically neutral as they can. This is consistent with an argument by Dany (2019) whereby he argued that the lines between humanitarian aid and the political sphere have become increasingly blurred. Hence, NGOs must walk this fine line between remaining neutral, impartial and independent while, at the same time, being prepared to take on a more active political role if necessary.

### **Sharing Resources**

The result reveals that there is a firmed opinion given by seven key informants (KI2, KI3, KI4, KI6, KI7, KI9, and KI10) that requirement to share resources might distort cooperation initiatives among humanitarian NGOs. The key informants said that,

“Yes, that also one of the issues...I would consider this the main issue.”

Key Informant 2

“...when you set with ten NGOs, let's say to cooperate together, maybe you will find some NGOs don't like to share resources with you... there must be an effect. Because our preparation may not be the same.”

Key Informant 3

“So, I think the sharing resources may lead, maybe the best reason for them not to do the collaboration. They satisfied, or they feel better for us to move lonely, move individually.”

Key Informant 9

According to KI4 and KI6, some NGOs were small and with limited capacity, whereas others were big and resourceful. The latter tend to globe-trot from one activity to another, while the earlier tend to free-ride the latter. Hence, it is hard to achieve full capacity cooperation among NGOs because each of them has their own objectives and have different resources which they considered to be secretive and thus, not willing to share with another NGO. The KI6 said that,

“We don't do that. I mean, we don't share like say that we receive certain amount from a certain group when we say to the other NGO, you go and ask for that same group. So that's the conflict of interest there.”

Key Informant 6

In addition, there are some limitations when it comes to the aspect of sharing resources because some of the resources are carrying the value of the organisation. Therefore, it would not be easier when it comes to the matter of sharing them. One explanation for this result may be the high level of competition within these NGOs, which can be barrier towards cooperation (Bunger, 2013). Organisations that form disaster relief networks are from different units with differing mandates, objectives, work cultures and procedures, which need to compete with one another for resources. As a result, NGOs often act independently and autonomously.

Unwillingness to share resource issue has already been highlighted by the previous studies as well. For instance, Tatham and Houghton (2011) revealed that there is rarely access to reliable and adequate information and timely exchange of information among humanitarian actors about the disaster location and its intensity (before it strikes), and the extent of damage in regional infrastructure (such as communication, transportation), the amount of population affected, or beneficiaries' needs. On the other hand, unequal distribution of resources in NGOs routine leads to natural and obvious domination by the larger NGOs as mentioned by the KI10.

“Yes, we can consider them as factors that might hinder the cooperation process. Of course, it is not logical for us to accept cooperation with NGO that does not want to share some information with us, for example, total amount of donations they have been collected during the campaign we are cooperating with.”

Key Informant 10

Contrary, there are two key informants (KI1 and KI8) agreed that a sharing resources is important for NGOs to formed cooperation with other parties. With cooperation, the first advantage that can be enjoyed by the NGOs is access to the most effective inputs in terms of cost and quality; and this access takes place in an efficient, fast and often preferential way. KI8 stressed that a mutual understanding of both parties is no doubt important for each NGO to form cooperation initiatives and subsequently sharing their resources. Pooling resources and sharing

facilities with other NGOs have become increasingly important to ensure that NGOs able to survive for a long period of time. Previous studies suggested that NGOs initiate partnerships to share resources since sharing can lead to the creation of knowledge (Emerson et al., 2012; Mitchell, 2014), greater fundraising capacity, economic efficiency, and organisational sustainability (Chang et al., 2011). To do that, the NGO are needed to have the willingness to share their resources in order to make sure the other party trust and willing to work together in different projects.

### **Security and Safety**

The Syrian crisis demonstrated the varying ways of NGOs and the UN handle dilemmas raised by sovereignty. Security and safety concerns for NGO workers and the difficulty of carrying out cross-border operations often prompted NGOs to follow government regulations. Majority of the key informants (KI1, KI2, KI3, KI7, KI8, and KI10) mentioned that security and safety are matters when it comes to cooperation between NGOs. However, the other three key informants (KI5, KI6, and KI9) mentioned that it does not matter, while Key Informant KI4 look at it as something that can only be offered with limitation.

Those key informants who mentioned that security and safety is something that does not matter when it comes to cooperation is because almost all NGOs understand the condition of security and safety of Syria. Safety concerns often prevented NGOs from reaching rebel-held areas and ensuring the security and safety of NGO workers is frequently in tension with the need for delivering humanitarian aid to high-risk areas. Therefore, if they want to cooperate to work together to help the people of Syria, they should go ahead as elaborated by the KI5.

“But I think among the NGOs, they already know about the security and safety in Syria. So that will not be a problem for the cooperation process.”

Key Informant 5

Another key informant mentioned that NGOs should not worry for not cooperate as when these NGOs enter Syria, the security will be offered by the third party and will brings them inside the country. For instance, Relief Offices of Local Councils, bodies which operate in rebel-held areas, will directly engage with NGOs to help identify local needs and distribute humanitarian assistance. Therefore, the part of cooperation initiative should not be affected as explained by the KI6.

“If you mean like when we go inside Syria, our security will be on the party or the group that brings us in.”

Key Informant 6

On the other hand, majority of the key informants (KI1, KI2, KI3, KI7, KI8, and KI10) agreed that security and safety does matters with regards to cooperation among NGOs. According to KI2, security and safety is an essential and crucial part when it comes to cooperation and accomplishing the Syrian refugees project successfully. He mentioned as follow,

“Yes, that also one of the issues. Some people are taking this for granted. I would consider this the main issue.”

Key Informant 2

The benefits of cooperation initiative are believed able to extend to the safety of NGOs workers. The cooperation strategy encourages NGOs to share their knowledge to develop a comprehensive understanding of local community webs of influence. NGOs are also able to break sovereignty in Syria because the security risks of working in rebel-held territories are not so dangerous that NGOs need government cooperation. In rebel-held areas, NGOs were able to negotiate with rebel groups to secure humanitarian access. This is consistent with an argument by KI3 that mentioned if the NGO is going to invite another NGO to partner with in a certain project, the matter security and safety will be one of the important factors to consider before establishing any kind of cooperation. Similarly, KI7, KI8 and KI9 opined that when it comes to the humanitarian projects especially those associated with war zones, safety and security should become the first priority before anything else. In this situation, it become very essential to cooperate among the NGOs to make sure that safety and secure is maintained to all those people who are involved in succession of the projects (Al Adem et al., 2018).

Overall, it has become increasingly dangerous for humanitarian agencies workers to operate visibly in complex emergencies. Ensuring the safety and security of NGO workers is frequently in tension with the need for delivering humanitarian aid to high-risk areas. However, issues pertaining to the safety and security of NGO workers go beyond immediate threats and extend to how an insecure and dangerous environment for aid workers can be created or mitigated. Of particular importance is prioritizing pre-emptive security planning and forming cooperation between NGOs could be seen as ways to reduce security and safety risks for NGOs.

### **Marketing Hook**

In this study, marketing hook is known to be a tool if used properly will bring about benefits, but if misused it will bring problems to different parties involved. The result reveals that majority of the key informants agreed that there is an impact of marketing hook towards cooperation initiatives among humanitarian NGOs. This indicates that those NGOs which are executing marketing hook for the purpose of showing off to the society that they are best and sincere NGO than any other available NGOs is causing more problems to the cooperation intention of that NGO. For instance, one of the NGOs which has worked together with other NGOs in a certain project is the one going out through different medias and showing to the public as if it is the only NGO carried out that project by itself without the involvement of other NGOs, but the reality is the opposite. The other two key informants (KI2 and KI3) argued that there is a positive impact of marketing hook on cooperative initiatives due to the fact that they look at it as if it is the right of every NGO.

Both commercial and non-profit actors have similar marketing strategies and draw on the same public donors. One substantial difference, though, is that commercial actors do not have access to financial contributions from private individuals. NGOs seen as the first on the battle field by their donors demonstrate they are more operational than their competitors. Answering questions in front of TV cameras, NGO spokespersons are becoming true “special media correspondents” in the eyes of spectators. Some NGOs even manipulated images to give them a more dramatic character by means of such techniques as changing colours, correcting the level of saturation, modifying the landscape, amplifying smoke and fire, and even re-setting the entire scene. Sometimes, the media coverage is done by only one correspondence from NGOs partnership. One of the key informants seen this on the positive side whereby the Key Informant KI3 argued that great marketing hook among their cooperation parties is even effective for media coverage. He commented that,

“...the NGO who makes a great marketing hook among our cooperate, that's really effective. But if the NGOs are not among our corporations, then they have rights.”

Key Informant 3

Contrary, majority of the key informants argued that marketing hook which is carried out by the NGO will cause the other NGOs to feel bad. Although NGO influence often depends on securing powerful allies, their credibility still depends in part on their ability to mobilize their own members and affect public opinion via the media. In a NGOs’ cooperation, the competition for attention is a zero-sum game. Any attention one actor gains are attention lost by another. These key informants comment as follow.

“Yes, it could create problem or something in the future. Now I see.”

Key Informant 6

“If done without the consent of others it’s not a good thing for cooperation.”

Key Informant 7

“Yes, could negatively affect its ability to cooperate with other NGOs somehow.”

Key Informant 10

The negative impact become more dangerous if NGO is involved in the cooperation with other NGOs for certain project but one of them is the one which takes advantage of the situation to do the marketing hook and shown it to the public as if the other ones are not involved in that project. NGO may also simply trade one attention-getting competition for another NGOs because the amount of attention the society can pay to them. However, they might receive loss of respect from the society because the public might think that that NGO did not do anything on that humanitarian project while people have contributed their money for it. The KI5 stressed that this is not the right thing to do as respect is the utmost important elements in cooperation. He stressed that,

“From my opinion, it could be a negative impact effect for ability to cooperate with others. So, when you go to live on TV or in any press release, you have to respect others to mention your cooperation partner.”

Key Informant 5

Victory in attention-getting competitions tends to be self-reinforcing. NGOs, for example, which manage to win the competition for the attention of donors, will be able to build strong organisations capable of winning other attention competitions. Unfortunately, marketing hook done by one NGO will affect the branding of the other NGOs and negatively bring down its reputation and make it difficult for other NGOs to cooperate in the future. Clearly, KI9 and KI10 highlighted that well-known NGOs start with the advantage of being well-known; lesser-known NGOs must work harder and spend more to build name recognition and awareness of their efforts (on the increasing competition to create NGO brand identities). They said that,

“Because it will affect the branding, I think the branding also on how the other NGO are going to do the reports, and to give to the donors or they are the collaborators.”

Key Informant 9

One of the marketing hooks issues which affects the cooperation among NGOs is situation whereby the NGO carrying out a humanitarian project is observed to be more focused on becoming famous rather than helping the people in need. For instance, some of the NGOs overly filming their works with their big logo. Besides, some NGOs even manipulated images to give them a more dramatic character. For example, one of Malaysian NGO captured a picture of Syrian kids during giving the aid. Unfortunately, this NGO's media team forgot to record the footage emotion of that kids and the mother cried when they received the aid. This NGO team asked the woman and the kids to acting and cry again. At the end of the day, they had a great video, but many people discovered that they actually asked the woman and the kids to act out what they missed on the video. This is one example that should not happen in humanitarian aid projects which seem they lost the focus on humanity concept.

### Conclusion

Overall, the results build support for the Theory of Collaborative Advantage that outlined the idea that cooperation initiatives can be achieved by integrating the resources and expertise of one organisation with that of others (Vangen & Huxham, 2013). The finding of this study suggests that humanitarian NGOs' cooperation can be resulted from a combination of several factors such as sharing resources, security and safety, as well as marketing hook. Further, the existence of political orientation effects is able to increase the capacity of the NGOs to maximize its ability to attract donors in contributing donation for Syrian crisis. Therefore, the Theory of Collaborative Advantage is applicable in this study, where a NGO's efforts to initiate cooperation with other parties might be perceived as building its own capacity. The results emphasize the need for Malaysian NGOs players to re-focus their direction towards humanity, working with experienced and well-established NGOs, practice humility and confidence, design plans and strategies, established NGOs union, as well as a specialised platform as part of efforts to at least reduce the impact of those challenges and indirectly stimulate cooperative initiatives among the humanitarian NGOs in Malaysia.

### Competing Interests

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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