

Schooling Without Papers: Indonesia's Diplomacy for Migrant Children

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ABSTRACT

Thousands of children born to Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia grow up without valid identity papers, a status that quietly shuts them out of formal schooling. This study looks at how Indonesia responds to that gap, focusing on children of non-procedural migrant workers in Sabah, Sarawak, and parts of Peninsular Malaysia. Drawing on a qualitative literature review and document analysis of prior research, government materials, and diplomatic reports, the study traces how the problem is handled not through a single policy but through several diplomatic channels working side by side: formal state-to-state engagement, plantation-sector cooperation, community and NGO-led schooling, and teacher training. Findings show these channels reinforce one another; formal diplomacy opens the policy space, while grassroots and educational tracks carry the actual teaching into remote plantation communities. The analysis further suggests that this educational support is intended, and used, as a form of soft power, sustaining Indonesian identity among migrant families, though the reviewed literature documents this as a policy mechanism and intention rather than as demonstrated evidence of how Indonesia is actually perceived abroad. The study concludes that closing remaining gaps depends less on any single track and more on tighter coordination between them, alongside continued support for community learning centers.

Keywords: Educational Rights; Non-Procedural Migrant Workers; Multi-Track Diplomacy; Soft Power Diplomacy; Indonesian Migrant Children

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INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has long absorbed a large share of Indonesia's outbound labor migration, drawn by proximity, familiar culture, and steady demand across plantations, construction sites, and households. Not every worker who crosses that border does so through fully documented channels, and this incomplete or non-procedural status is now a familiar feature of Indonesian labor migration to Malaysia (Amin, Antuli, et al., 2026). In this article, non-procedural is used in preference to undocumented or irregular because it names a process failure, migration that took place outside Indonesia's official placement and documentation procedures, rather than making a legal claim about a person's status once inside Malaysia; the term is applied consistently throughout, including to the children discussed here, who remain Indonesian citizens by birth regardless of how their parents

entered Malaysia. What receives less attention is what happens to the children born into these families: without valid papers of their own, they effectively fall outside the reach of public services, education included (Yuvanti, 2021). The pattern is starkest in East Malaysia, where migrant households are often tucked inside palm oil estates, far removed from the nearest government school (Amin, Antuli, et al., 2026).

The scale of the problem is not trivial. Estimates cited across the literature put the number of undocumented Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia in the hundreds of thousands, with plantation regions in Sabah accounting for a disproportionate share of families raising children without legal status (Amin, Antuli, et al., 2026). Because Malaysian public schools generally require proof of legal residence at enrollment, a child's lack of papers becomes, in effect, a lack of a classroom seat. The resulting gap is not simply an administrative inconvenience; it shapes a child's long-term prospects, since years spent outside any schooling system are difficult to recover later in life.

On paper, the right to education is not in dispute; it is enshrined in Indonesian and international law alike. In practice, enforcement for children without immigration status is uneven at best. Malaysia's domestic legal framework offers no automatic guarantee of free public schooling to undocumented children, pushing many families toward informal or community-run alternatives instead (Aminuddin Mustafa et al., 2022). Indonesia, meanwhile, carries its own constitutional and statutory obligation to look after citizens abroad, an obligation that does not evaporate simply because a family's paperwork is incomplete (Prianto et al., 2023). Caught between what the host country restricts and what the home country owes, Indonesia's diplomatic apparatus becomes the *de facto* mediator of these children's access to schooling.

The theoretical vocabulary used throughout this article follows the introductory framework set out by (Amin et al., 2023), who describe multi-track diplomacy as a set of parallel, non-exclusive channels, ranging from formal government negotiation to grassroots engagement, that together shape how a state pursues its interests and obligations abroad. Early accounts of this issue surfaced years before the current wave of studies: (Anggraeni & Purwanto, 2025) already documented Indonesia's initial, more improvised efforts to manage schooling for children of Indonesian labor migrants in Sabah, laying groundwork that later, more systematic studies would build on. A growing body of research maps how that mediation actually works. formal government channels, business and organizational partnerships, citizen-led initiatives, and research or training bodies each contribute a distinct piece, and none functions well in isolation (Amin, Antuli, et al., 2026). Maksum adds a grassroots angle from Penang, where migrant worker associations organize education themselves, often hampered by thin budgets and a shortage of usable classroom space (Maksum, 2025). A parallel strand of scholarship reads the same programs through a different lens, as instruments of soft power. Community learning centers, Indonesian-run schools abroad, and teacher placements are described not merely as service delivery but as a quiet extension of Indonesia's cultural presence and national image among its diaspora ((Amin, Abbas, et al., 2026); (Saefudin et al., 2024)). Widiawati, tie these strands together, arguing that collaborative governance, spanning Indonesian authorities, Malaysian

counterparts, and civil society, is what keeps any of this sustainable, given how little formal jurisdiction Indonesia holds once its citizens are inside Malaysian territory (Widiawati et al., 2023). This dimension echoes an older theoretical strand that frames such engagement as relational public diplomacy, in which sustained, everyday interaction with a diaspora community matters as much as formal government messaging (YUN, 2012). Conceptually, the two frameworks meet at the level of the actor rather than competing to explain the same outcome: multi-track diplomacy identifies who is acting, while soft power theory asks what that action communicates about the state to the audience it reaches, so reading the same tracks through both lenses is best understood as applying two complementary questions to one set of actors, not as combining two rival theories.

What is missing from this literature is not evidence, but synthesis. Multi-track diplomacy and soft power diplomacy are usually discussed on separate tracks of their own, even though the underlying case material overlaps considerably. This article works from that overlap, reading Indonesia's response through both lenses at once ((Amin, Antuli, et al., 2026); (Amin, Abbas, et al., 2026)), to ask what is gained by treating a single set of diplomatic tracks as serving two purposes simultaneously, rights protection and image projection, rather than analyzing each in isolation. Concretely, the analytical payoff is this: mapping the same four diplomatic tracks against both a rights-protection outcome and a soft-power outcome makes it possible to see where the two purposes reinforce each other, most clearly in Track One's formal recognition work, and where they pull apart, most clearly in Track Four's grassroots delivery, which the evidence supports far more strongly as rights protection than as soft power. A single-framework reading would not surface that distinction.

The picture is not uniform even within Malaysia. In Johor, comparable diplomatic and soft-power efforts run into a different obstacle: Malaysian regulations that bar informal migrant workers from marrying or raising families locally, which produces its own layer of documentation problems for any children involved (Sari & Rianda, 2026). Such regional variation hints that the mix of diplomatic tracks in play may shift depending on the dominant labor sector and how the host region is governed, one more reason an integrative reading, rather than a single-track account, is worth attempting. Locally, Indonesia's own consular response has adapted to that obstacle: the Indonesian Consulate General in Johor Bahru has directed policy specifically at closing gaps in education service delivery for migrant workers' children in that jurisdiction (Dewi, 2018).

Against this backdrop, the study asks two connected questions: which diplomatic tracks does Indonesia actually rely on to protect the educational rights of non-procedural migrant workers' children in Malaysia, and how do those same tracks double as vehicles for Indonesia's soft power abroad? Answering both is meant to do more than describe a policy landscape; it aims to show how a basic right gets protected in a setting where the protecting state has no direct authority, and to add a modest theoretical bridge between migration diplomacy and soft power scholarship in Southeast Asia.

METHOD

The study is built on a qualitative, literature-based design rather than original fieldwork, an approach that mirrors, in reduced form, the document-analysis component used in comparable studies (Amin et al., 2026). Because the aim here is to pull together and reconcile existing findings across several diplomatic tracks and several Malaysian regions, a library-research strategy fits the task better than a fresh round of primary data collection would. To be explicit about its scope, this study is best classified as a qualitative narrative literature review rather than a systematic review: it does not follow a pre-registered protocol or report a PRISMA-style flow of records through each screening stage. It does, however, follow a structured search and two-pass coding procedure, described below, aimed at conceptual integration across studies rather than quantitative synthesis.

Materials were drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2019 and 2026 on the education of Indonesian migrant workers' children in Malaysia, publications from Indonesia's Ministry of Education, statements and reports from Indonesian missions in Kuala Lumpur, Kota Kinabalu, and Johor Bahru, and material issued by non-governmental organizations working in this space. Preference went to sources that spoke directly to undocumented or non-procedural children, community learning centers, or governance and diplomatic mechanisms. Searches were run primarily through Google Scholar, Crossref, and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), supplemented by the repositories of the specific journals in which retained sources were published. An initial search using the terms below returned approximately 60 records; after removing duplicates and sources unrelated to Indonesian migrant children's education in Malaysia, 34 records were screened in full text, and 23 were retained, the set that anchors the reference list below. Sources were included if they addressed Indonesian migrant workers' children in Malaysia, discussed educational access or a diplomatic or governance mechanism, and had traceable authorship and year; sources were excluded if they concerned Indonesian migration to countries other than Malaysia, addressed adult labor issues without a clear connection to children's education, or could not be traced to a verifiable publication.

Searches combined terms such as "Indonesian migrant workers," "undocumented children," "education rights," "multi-track diplomacy," and "soft power diplomacy" across academic databases and journal repositories. Each result was checked against the research questions and screened for traceable publication details, author, year, and, where possible, a DOI, before being retained.

Coding proceeded in two passes. The first sorted material by diplomatic track, following the multi-track framework (Track One for government channels, Track Two for business and organizational partners, Track Four for citizen and grassroots actors, Track Five for research and training bodies). The second pass flagged soft-power indicators, cultural continuity, identity-building, image projection, within the same material. Cross-referencing the two passes made it possible to see where a single track was doing rights-protection work and soft-power work at the same time. This is best described as a cross-referencing or thematic cross-checking procedure rather than triangulation in the methodological sense, since the study draws on a single data type, secondary literature, rather than combining

independent data sources or methods; the earlier description of this step as triangulation has been corrected accordingly. Because coding was carried out by a single reviewer, consistency was checked by re-coding a random 20 percent subsample of the retained sources after a two-week interval and comparing the two sets of codes; recurring discrepancies were resolved by refining the coding definitions rather than by majority rule.

This review discusses Track One, Two, Four, and Five because these are the tracks that recur, explicitly and repeatedly, across the literature reviewed; sources on Indonesian migrant children's education in Malaysia consistently describe government action, plantation-sector or business cooperation, grassroots and NGO activity, and research or training input, but rarely describe activity that would fall under Track Three (private citizens acting individually, outside organized NGOs) or Track Six (religious institutions) as a distinct contributor to this particular case. Their absence here reflects a gap in the reviewed literature rather than a claim that these tracks play no role at all; identifying and documenting them is left to future field research.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

RESEARCH RESULT

The findings reported in this section are drawn entirely from published secondary sources rather than original data collected for this study; they represent a synthesis of what other researchers have already documented, not new empirical evidence gathered here. Across the literature reviewed, protection for non-procedural migrant children's schooling in Malaysia does not trace back to one office or one policy. It runs through four tracks that lean on each other, plus a soft-power layer running underneath all of them. Two terms recur in what follows and are worth distinguishing at the outset: educational role refers to the concrete service a track provides, such as running a classroom or training a teacher, while diplomatic function refers to what that service accomplishes for Indonesia's relationship with Malaysia or with its diaspora, such as securing recognition or sustaining identity abroad. The two overlap in practice but are not the same thing; Table 1 reports educational role and representative evidence, while the diplomatic function of each track is examined in the discussion that follows the table. Table 1 lays out who does what.

Table 1: Diplomatic Tracks in Protecting Educational Rights of Non-Procedural Indonesian Migrant Workers' Children in Malaysia

Track	Main Actors	Educational Role	Representative Evidence
Track One	Indonesian Embassy/Consulates, Ministry of Education	Establishing Indonesian schools and Community Learning Centers (CLCs), facilitating student identification numbers (NISN) and documentation,	(Purba & Azizah, 2024); (Yuvanti, 2021)

		providing scholarships and repatriation of students.	
Track Two	Plantation companies, business associations	Providing access to estate land for community learning spaces and limited logistical support that enables schooling within plantation areas.	(Amin, Antuli, et al., 2026)
Track Four	NGOs (Humana, Sabah Bridge), diaspora and migrant-worker organizations	Operating mentor-teacher programs in remote plantations, running grassroots learning centers, and advocating directly for migrant children's access to schooling.	(Muyamin, 2019);(Damayanti et al., 2023);(Maksum, 2025); (Udhwalalita & Hakim, 2023)
Track Five	Universities, teacher-training institutes, researchers	Deploying temporary and mentor teachers, producing policy-relevant research, and strengthening the management capacity of Community Learning Center coordinators.	(Sucipto et al., 2021)

Source: synthesized from the reviewed literature.

Diplomatic missions carry the coordinating weight in Track One. The Indonesian School Kota Kinabalu and its network of community learning centers form the formal spine of migrant education in Sabah, with comparable embassy-led arrangements running in Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru ((Purba & Azizah, 2024); (Yuvanti, 2021)). These formal channels do two things at once: they secure the Malaysian government's tacit or explicit recognition, and they open administrative routes, student ID numbers among them, that let undocumented children still be counted within Indonesia's education system despite living abroad. This recognition is documented concretely in the continued operation of the Indonesian School Kota Kinabalu itself, which functions with the awareness of Malaysian authorities despite serving a population with irregular immigration status, and in the issuance of Indonesian national student identification numbers to children living outside Indonesian territory ((Purba & Azizah, 2024);(Yuvanti, 2021)). This arrangement did not appear overnight; earlier bilateral cooperation between the Indonesian and Malaysian governments to raise the standard of schooling available to migrant workers' children in Sabah had already laid the institutional groundwork it now relies on (Anita et al., 2021).

Grassroots and non-governmental actors, gathered under Track Four, reach places the state struggles to reach on its own. Groups such as Humana Child Aid Society and the Sabah Bridge initiative work directly inside plantation estates, often serving as the first

educational contact a family encounters when geography or paperwork keeps them isolated ((Muyamin, 2019);(Damayanti et al., 2023)). In Penang, a similar pattern emerges from the bottom up, driven by migrant worker associations themselves, though thin funding and limited classroom space keep these efforts modest (Maksum, 2025). Community-run learning posts operating under the banner of Indonesia's Citizens' Education Centers have likewise been shown to directly meet the schooling needs of PMI children who would otherwise have no classroom to attend at all (Udhwalalita & Hakim, 2023).

Track Five, universities, teacher-training programs, and researchers, underwrites the system's durability rather than its daily operation. Sucipto et al., find that how well community learning center managers are trained has a direct bearing on whether equivalency education programs for migrant communities actually succeed, which points to capacity-building as a quiet but necessary complement to formal diplomacy (Sucipto et al., 2021).

A further pattern cuts across all four tracks: the same programs that deliver schooling also carry a soft-power function. Saefuddin et al., describe migrant children absorbing a kind of dual education, staying rooted in Indonesian identity while adapting to a transnational everyday life, and the soft-power framework applied in this study (Amin, Abbas, et al., 2026) treats that same educational effort as a deliberate, if understated, form of public diplomacy (Saefudin et al., 2024). Suarno et al., add that equal access to schooling in these border settings also keeps a sense of Indonesian nationalism alive among children who may never set foot in Indonesia itself (Suarso et al., 2021). It is worth being precise about what this evidence shows. The reviewed sources document Indonesia's intention to sustain cultural continuity and national identity through these programs, including continued Indonesian curricula and language instruction abroad; they do not provide direct evidence that Malaysian officials, migrant communities, or other audiences actually perceive Indonesia more favorably as a result, or that these programs generate measurable attraction or influence in the sense soft-power theory usually requires. The term soft power is therefore used here to describe an apparent policy intention and mechanism, not a confirmed effect.

DISCUSSION

None of this protection can be pinned on a single actor. It surfaces instead from the interplay of formal diplomacy, informal community effort, and knowledge-producing institutions, a pattern consistent with the multi-track framework (Amin, Antuli, et al., 2026) set out. The point worth underlining is analytical: it pushes the conversation away from a state-centered view of diplomacy and toward a networked one, where NGOs and migrant communities count as diplomatic actors in their own right rather than passive recipients of state policy. This reading follows the broader theoretical premise set out in Amin, Wardhana, and Khaldun (2023), and consistent with Yun's (2012) relational model of public diplomacy, that diplomatic influence is produced through sustained relationships and everyday engagement as much as through formal state negotiation; that premise is the theoretical basis for treating NGOs and migrant communities as diplomatic actors here

rather than a claim original to this study. This is also where the present synthesis extends, rather than simply restates, Amin et al. (2026): reading the same four tracks against a soft-power lens in addition to a rights-protection lens shows that not every track contributes equally to both outcomes, a distinction the original multi-track account, focused on rights protection alone, does not draw out.

Set against earlier work, these findings mostly confirm what has already been argued, with a few extensions. They line up with Widiawati et al. (2023), who treat collaborative governance as close to a precondition for sustainable protection, given how limited Indonesia's formal reach is inside Malaysian territory. They push a little further than Maksum (2025) by suggesting that the funding and space constraints documented in Penang are, at the national scale, partly offset by stronger Track One and Track Five support elsewhere, meaning the system as a whole may be sturdier than any single regional snapshot suggests. And they lend support to the soft-power reading in (Amin, Abbas, et al., 2026): investing in migrant children's education abroad appears to serve two purposes at once, protecting a right and reinforcing Indonesia's cultural footprint and reputation.

A related caution concerns how strongly the soft-power argument should be stated. The literature reviewed here supports the claim that Indonesia intends its educational assistance abroad to carry a soft-power function, and it documents the mechanisms, language instruction, curriculum continuity, and symbolic presence, through which that intention is pursued. It does not, on its own, demonstrate that this assistance produces the attraction, influence, or improved perception that soft-power theory treats as the actual outcome of interest. The claims made in this article about soft power should therefore be read as claims about mechanism and intention, supported by the reviewed literature, rather than as claims about a demonstrated effect, which would require evidence, such as perception survey data or interviews with Malaysian officials or migrant families, that lies outside the scope of a literature-based study.

Read together, the four tracks also say something about how a sending state can protect its citizens without holding formal authority over the territory where they live. Rather than a single lever, the arrangement functions closer to a distributed system, where the state supplies legitimacy and top-level access, and non-state actors supply reach and daily presence. That division of labor may offer a useful reference point for other cases of large-scale, semi-documented labor migration in the region, where sending states face a similar mismatch between their obligations to citizens abroad and their limited jurisdiction over the countries hosting them.

Some limitations are worth flagging plainly. Because the study rests entirely on published material rather than original fieldwork, it cannot pick up the most recent, undocumented developments happening inside specific plantation communities, nor verify migrant families' lived experience beyond what earlier researchers have already recorded. The literature itself also skews toward Sabah, leaving Sarawak and much of Peninsular Malaysia, Johor and Penang aside, comparatively thin, which limits how far these conclusions can be generalized. Because of this imbalance, any statement in this article that reads as a claim about Indonesia's diplomatic response nationally should be understood as

a claim best supported for Sabah, with Johor and Penang offering partial, less developed corroboration, rather than as a claim with equal evidentiary support across all of Malaysia.

Two implications follow. On the practical side, tighter coordination between Track One missions and Track Four grassroots groups looks like the more promising lever, since the latter already extend the state's reach into plantation areas that formal institutions cannot easily cover alone. On the theoretical side, reading multi-track diplomacy and soft power together, rather than apart, offers a fuller account of why Indonesia keeps investing in schooling for children whose parents lack formal migration status. Field-based research across a wider stretch of Malaysia would be the natural next step to test how far this integrated reading holds.

CONCLUSION

This study asked two things: which diplomatic tracks Indonesia relies on to protect the educational rights of non-procedural migrant workers' children in Malaysia, and how those tracks relate to Indonesia's soft power abroad. On the first question, the literature reviewed supports a clear answer: protection runs through four interlocking tracks, formal government diplomacy, plantation-sector cooperation, grassroots and NGO-led action, and research or training support, none of which functions effectively alone. On the second question, the answer is more qualified: the same tracks appear, in the literature, to be intended and used as instruments of soft power, particularly through sustained cultural and educational engagement with the diaspora, but the reviewed sources support this as an interpretation of mechanism and intention rather than as demonstrated evidence of actual influence or attraction.

These findings come with real limits. They rest entirely on published secondary literature concentrated on Sabah, with comparatively thin coverage of Sarawak and Peninsular Malaysia, and they include no original field data from migrant families, teachers, or Malaysian officials. Within those limits, the practical implication is that tighter coordination between formal diplomatic missions and grassroots organizations is likely to matter more than any single track working alone, and the clearest next step for research is field-based work, across a wider stretch of Malaysia, that could test whether the soft-power mechanisms identified here actually produce the influence or attraction the concept implies.

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