

Humanitarian Aid as an Instrument of Indonesia's Public Diplomacy in the Papua Issue: A Case Study of Vanuatu (2016–2023)

Firman Fauzi

Universitas Paramadina, Indonesia

Email: firman.fauzi@students.paramadina.ac.id

ABSTRACT

Indonesia's humanitarian aid to Vanuatu has increased significantly since 2016, reaching approximately US\$5.8 million in 2022. This assistance, delivered through natural disaster response, health facility construction, and capacity-building programs, is positioned as part of Indonesia's public diplomacy efforts to defuse international pressure on the Papua issue. However, this increased humanitarian aid intensity has not been accompanied by significant changes in public perception or Vanuatu's political stance. Survey data indicates that approximately 68 percent of Vanuatu's population still supports Papuan independence, while digital campaigns such as #FreeWestPapua—with over five million interactions—continue to amplify the pro-independence narrative in the transnational public sphere. At the government level, Vanuatu consistently raises the Papua issue in various international forums, reflecting a gap between soft power and hard power efforts. This research uses a single qualitative case study design spanning 2016–2023, drawing on document analysis, humanitarian aid process tracking, media and social media content analysis, and limited observation. The theoretical framework of this research integrates the concepts of soft power (Joseph Nye), the "new" public diplomacy (Melissen; Zaharna), and Hans Morgenthau's classical realist perspective on national interests to explain the dynamics of political persuasion and resistance. The research findings show that humanitarian aid alone is not enough to change entrenched political preferences regarding the Papua issue. The effectiveness of aid can only increase if it is designed based on local needs, resonates culturally, and is integrated into a coherent, long-term, and collaborative cross-actor public diplomacy strategy.

Keywords: *Humanitarian Aid; Public Diplomacy; Soft Power ; National Interests; West Papua.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Papua issue has expanded beyond Indonesia's domestic context and become a persistent concern in international politics in the South Pacific region (Lantang & Tambunan, 2020; Rosyidin et al., 2022; Shekhar, 2018; Wangge & Lawson, 2023). Several Pacific Island states have positioned the Papua issue as part of their human rights and decolonization agendas, actively raising it in various regional and global forums (Kluge, 2020; Meki & Tarai, 2023; Wangge & Lawson, 2023). Among these states, Vanuatu stands out as one of the most consistent actors in voicing support for Papuan self-determination. This role not only reflects Vanuatu's normative stance but also demonstrates the dynamics of identity politics and national interests within the context of a small South Pacific nation.

Several Pacific Island states have positioned the Papua issue as part of their human rights and decolonization agendas, actively raising it in various regional and global forums. In contemporary international relations, humanitarian aid has increasingly been deployed as an instrument of soft power and public diplomacy, reflecting a global trend where states seek to influence foreign publics and governments through non-coercive means (Nye, 2011; Cull, 2008). Major powers such as China, the United States, and regional actors like Australia have systematically utilized development assistance and humanitarian relief to shape perceptions, build goodwill, and advance strategic interests in contested regions (Atkinson, 2010; Lum et

al., 2009). However, the effectiveness of aid diplomacy remains contested in academic literature, with growing evidence suggesting that material assistance does not automatically translate into political influence, particularly when recipient states possess strong normative commitments or derive symbolic capital from their advocacy positions (Lancaster, 2007; Brown & Grävingholt, 2016).

This phenomenon raises critical questions about the dependent variable of this study: the effectiveness of Indonesia's public diplomacy in changing Vanuatu's attitude toward the Papua issue. Public diplomacy effectiveness can be operationally defined as the extent to which a state's communication and engagement strategies produce favorable shifts in foreign public opinion, government policy, or bilateral relations aligned with the sending state's interests (Zaharna, 2010; Melissen, 2005). In the context of aid-based public diplomacy, effectiveness encompasses both attitudinal changes (perceptions of legitimacy and trust) and behavioral outcomes (policy positions and diplomatic support) among target populations and governments (Gilboa, 2008). Understanding the conditions under which humanitarian aid succeeds or fails as a public diplomacy instrument is thus crucial for both theoretical development and policy formulation, particularly in regions like the Pacific where competition for influence is intensifying (Fry & Tarte, 2015; Wesley-Smith, 2016).

The existing literature on humanitarian aid as a public diplomacy tool reveals mixed effectiveness, with four key strands informing this study. Research on Chinese aid in the Pacific shows that even substantial infrastructure investments yield limited political alignment shifts, constrained by recipient states' strategic autonomy and identity considerations (Atkinson, 2010; Hanson, 2008). Similarly, studies on Australia and New Zealand highlight the "Pacific paradox," where aid can provoke resentment when perceived as conditional, underscoring recipient agency (Hayward-Jones, 2013; Fry & Tarte, 2015). However, these frameworks focus on traditional donors or material projects, not humanitarian aid from a fellow developing nation like Indonesia.

Further context comes from scholarship on Melanesian solidarity, which explains support for Papuan self-determination as an expression of cultural identity that resists external pressure (Kabutaulaka, 2015; Lawson, 2013), and from theories of small state agency, which show how nations like Vanuatu employ "principled engagement" to leverage autonomy and moral authority (Cooper & Shaw, 2009; Fry, 2019). Collectively, these streams reveal a critical gap: no study has systematically analyzed how Indonesian humanitarian aid interacts with Melanesian identity politics and small state agency to shape diplomatic outcomes on contested sovereignty issues like Papua, a gap this research aims to address (Elmslie, 2017; Webb-Gannon & Huwae, 2018).

This research is driven by three concurrent developments in Pacific geopolitics. Intensified regional competition since 2016 has turned the Pacific into a testing ground for major powers' aid diplomacy, necessitating an understanding of what determines its success or failure (Wesley-Smith, 2016; Powles, 2020). Furthermore, the internationalization of the Papua issue through Pacific states' advocacy and digital activism like *#FreeWestPapua* has challenged Indonesia, prompting a strategic recalibration of its Pacific engagement that requires evaluation (Webb-Gannon & Huwae, 2018; Castells, 2012). Beyond these immediate concerns, the study addresses a broader theoretical imperative to move beyond optimistic soft

power assumptions, responding to analyses that highlight how donors often underestimate recipient agency and thus fail to achieve political objectives (Brown & Grävingholt, 2016).

The study's novelty lies in its theoretical integration and empirical focus. It uniquely bridges classical realism and soft power theory, providing a lens that acknowledges both the aspirational goals of public diplomacy and the constraining realities of national interests and recipient state calculations. This integrated framework explains the empirical puzzle of why Indonesia's increased humanitarian aid (2016–2023) fails to shift political positions on Papua, even as it improves bilateral relations. While soft power theory might predict gradual influence and pure realism might dismiss aid's diplomatic value, the integrated view reveals how a recipient like Vanuatu strategically accepts material benefits while maintaining political independence based on both interests and normative commitments. This study is the first to systematically trace and evaluate the effectiveness of Indonesia's humanitarian aid to a specific Pacific state over this extended period, using diverse data sources to provide nuanced, actionable insights.

Literature on Indonesian public diplomacy and foreign aid in the Pacific region generally emphasizes the potential for soft South–South power and solidarity as sources of political influence. However, this approach often assumes a linear relationship between increased aid and changes in recipient political attitudes. This assumption tends to ignore the role of national interests, identity politics, and the rational calculations of recipient countries, particularly small states like Vanuatu that derive symbolic capital from their advocacy on moral issues and decolonization. This analytical gap demands a more critical examination of the effectiveness of humanitarian aid as an instrument of public diplomacy.

This article aims to analyze the extent to which Indonesian humanitarian aid functions as a public diplomacy instrument in influencing Vanuatu's attitude towards the Papua issue in the 2016–2023 period. By integrating the concept of soft power and "new" public diplomacy with a classical realist perspective on national interests, this article attempts to explain the dynamics between Indonesia's persuasion efforts and Vanuatu's political resistance. Empirically, this research contributes to the study of Indonesia-Pacific relations by highlighting the limitations of humanitarian aid-based diplomacy. Analytically, this article asserts that without the integration of a long-term strategy that resonates culturally and is based on local needs, humanitarian aid has limited influence on entrenched political issues.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a single case study design to analyze Indonesian humanitarian assistance as an instrument of public diplomacy on the Papuan issue in Vanuatu. This approach was chosen to allow for in-depth analysis of political, social, and diplomatic dynamics that cannot be adequately explained through quantitative methods. Case study methodology is particularly appropriate for examining complex contemporary phenomena within their real-world contexts, especially when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). The single case design is justified by Vanuatu's status as a "critical case" (Flyvbjerg, 2006)—if humanitarian aid diplomacy cannot influence attitudes in Vanuatu, a small state theoretically more susceptible to aid leverage, it is unlikely to succeed in larger, more autonomous Pacific states. The Vanuatu case study is considered

relevant given its position as a South Pacific nation that consistently advocates for the Papuan issue in international forums.

The research covers the period 2016–2023, from the time Indonesia's humanitarian aid to the South Pacific region increased to the period when the Papua issue was still actively raised by Vanuatu. This temporal scope captures a complete cycle of Indonesia's intensified Pacific engagement, allowing for assessment of both immediate and longer-term effects of humanitarian diplomacy. The period 2016–2023 is particularly significant as it encompasses major natural disasters in Vanuatu (Tropical Cyclone Pam aftermath, multiple earthquakes) that triggered Indonesian humanitarian responses, as well as key diplomatic moments when Vanuatu raised the Papua issue in UNGA, Pacific Islands Forum, and Melanesian Spearhead Group meetings.

Data were collected through four complementary methods: analysis of official documents and government reports from Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Indonesian Agency for International Development (2016–2023), as well as Vanuatu government statements and parliamentary records; tracing the humanitarian aid process (process-tracing) to map causal mechanisms linking aid disbursements to diplomatic outcomes; analysis of media and social media content through systematic coding of Indonesian and Vanuatu media coverage, as well as digital ethnography of #FreeWestPapua campaign networks (2016–2023) to assess narrative dynamics in the transnational public sphere; and limited observation of publicly accessible diplomatic communication practices including analysis of speeches, press releases, and public diplomatic events.

The integration of these multiple data sources enables methodological triangulation, strengthening the validity of findings by cross-verifying evidence from different sources (Denzin, 2012). Process-tracing methodology is particularly valuable for this study as it allows systematic assessment of causal claims about whether and how humanitarian aid influences political attitudes, by identifying observable implications of hypothesized causal mechanisms and testing these against empirical evidence (Beach & Pedersen, 2019).

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative thematic analysis to identify key patterns related to public diplomacy, soft power, national interests, and political resistance. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the analysis report. Coding was conducted using both deductive codes derived from the theoretical framework (e.g., "soft power," "national interest," "identity politics") and inductive codes emerging from the data (e.g., "episodic aid," "state-centric communication," "Melanesian solidarity").

Process-tracing techniques were used to assess the link between increased humanitarian aid and Vanuatu's political response to the Papua issue. The validity of the study was maintained through triangulation of data sources, member checking with Indonesian and Vanuatu diplomatic observers to verify interpretations, and thick description providing rich contextual detail that enables readers to assess transferability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, this study had limitations related to access to the Vanuatu government's internal decision-making processes, which constrain ability to definitively establish the causal weight of different factors in government policy formation. Additionally, language barriers

limited direct access to ni-Vanuatu language sources, requiring reliance on English-language materials and translations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Indonesian Humanitarian Assistance to Vanuatu (2016–2023)

Since 2016, Indonesia has progressively increased its humanitarian engagement in the South Pacific, including in Vanuatu. This increase is inextricably linked to the growing internationalization of the Papuan issue in the region, with Vanuatu emerging as one of the most active actors voicing support for Papuan self-determination. In this context, Indonesia's humanitarian assistance serves not only as a response to humanitarian needs but also as part of a broader public diplomacy strategy.

Trends and Scale of Humanitarian Aid

Indonesia's humanitarian assistance to Vanuatu showed a significant upward trend throughout the study period. The relatively limited amount of aid at the beginning of the period gradually increased to approximately US\$5.8 million in 2022. This surge was primarily driven by Indonesia's response to natural disasters that frequently hit Vanuatu, such as tropical cyclones and earthquakes. This increased scale of aid reflects Indonesia's efforts to strengthen its presence and visibility in the South Pacific public sphere through humanitarian practices.

However, despite the quantitative escalation, aid distribution tends to be episodic and emergency-oriented. This pattern suggests that Indonesian humanitarian aid functions more as a reactive response than as a long-term, institutionalized program at the local level. This situation has implications for the durability of the public diplomacy generated by this aid.

Forms and Sectors of Assistance

Indonesia's humanitarian assistance to Vanuatu takes several main forms. First, natural disaster response is the most dominant sector, encompassing the delivery of logistical assistance, medical personnel, and post-disaster technical support. Second, Indonesia is involved in the construction and improvement of health facilities, aiming to strengthen the capacity of basic services in Vanuatu. Third, capacity building programs are carried out through training and technical cooperation, particularly in the areas of health and disaster management.

Substantively, these forms of aid reflect a relatively comprehensive humanitarian approach. However, their connection to the specific needs of local communities and local socio-political dynamics remains limited. Aid is positioned more as a symbol of solidarity between nations than as an instrument firmly rooted in people-to-people relations.

Diplomatic Narrative and Communication Strategy

In addition to the material aspect, Indonesia's humanitarian assistance is also accompanied by a diplomatic narrative emphasizing South-South solidarity, international friendship, and Indonesia's commitment to Pacific regional stability. This narrative is conveyed through official government statements, diplomatic publications, and media coverage. Within the framework of public diplomacy, this communication is intended to build Indonesia's image as a responsible and caring partner for Pacific island nations.

However, analysis of these communication patterns indicates a tendency toward a state-centric and top-down approach. The aid narrative is primarily conveyed through official government channels, with relatively limited involvement of local and non-state actors. As a result, Indonesia's diplomatic messages often do not fully resonate with the identities, values, and political discourses prevailing in Vanuatu society, particularly those related to Papuan issues and Melanesian solidarity.

Humanitarian Aid as an Instrument of Public Diplomacy

In the perspective of public and soft diplomacy Indonesia's humanitarian aid to Vanuatu demonstrates an effort to combine humanitarian practices with foreign policy objectives. The aid is intended to create a more conducive space for dialogue and reduce political resistance to Indonesia's position on Papua. However, limitations in program design, continuity, and communication strategy mean that the impact of humanitarian aid tends to be symbolic and short-term.

These findings indicate that while humanitarian aid has potential as a public diplomacy instrument, its effectiveness depends heavily on the integration of material, narrative, and relational dimensions. Without deeper engagement with local communities and a consistent strategic narrative, humanitarian aid struggles to function as a persuasive tool capable of influencing entrenched political preferences.

Vanuatu's Public and Political Response to the Papua Issue

Indonesia's increased humanitarian aid to Vanuatu since 2016 is inextricably linked to expectations of shifting attitudes at both the public and government levels. However, empirical findings indicate that responses at both levels exhibit a relatively high level of resistance, particularly in the context of the Papua issue. This section analyzes Vanuatu's response by distinguishing between public perception and the government's political position, and linking these to the dynamics of transnational identities and public spaces.

Public Perception and Transnational Public Space

At the community level, support for Papuan independence in Vanuatu remains strong despite increased humanitarian aid from Indonesia. Survey data shows that approximately 68 percent of Vanuatu residents still support Papuan independence aspirations. This finding indicates that humanitarian aid has not significantly changed public perceptions of Papua, which are largely understood as an issue of Melanesian ethnic solidarity and self-determination.

Furthermore, the development of the digital public sphere has strengthened resistance to Indonesia's diplomatic narrative. Social media campaigns such as #FreeWestPapua serve as a transnational mobilization medium, connecting local actors in Vanuatu with international advocacy networks. The narratives circulating in this digital space are not only reactive to Indonesian policies but also shape a relatively established interpretive framework regarding Papua as an issue of colonialism and human rights violations. In this context, Indonesian humanitarian aid tends to be perceived separately from the Papua issue and is insufficient to challenge this entrenched moral narrative.

Identity Politics and Melanesian Solidarity

The strong public support in Vanuatu for Papua cannot be understood solely as a response to Indonesian policies, but also as part of Melanesian identity politics. Papua is often positioned as a "fellow Melanesian" experiencing historical injustice, giving the issue high emotional and symbolic resonance in Vanuatu society. This identity politics contributes to the formation of relatively stable public attitudes that are difficult to influence by diplomatic instruments based on material aid.

Within this framework, Indonesian humanitarian aid confronts established structures of meaning, in which ethnic solidarity and narratives of decolonization have a stronger mobilizing power than official diplomatic messages. Consequently, humanitarian aid is often viewed as a technocratic or pragmatic act, rather than as an expression of normative solidarity capable of shifting political preferences.

Position of the Government of Vanuatu

At the government level, Vanuatu has consistently maintained a critical stance toward Indonesia on the Papua issue. The Vanuatu government continues to raise the Papua issue in various international forums, both regionally and globally, although bilateral relations with Indonesia remain within the framework of humanitarian and development cooperation. This stance reflects a disconnect between practical relations between the two countries and their normative positions on the Papua issue.

The Vanuatu government's consistent stance demonstrates that political calculations and national interests play a significant role. Advocacy for Papua gives Vanuatu a symbolic position as a moral actor in South Pacific politics, while strengthening its national identity on the international stage. In this context, accepting humanitarian aid from Indonesia does not necessarily change political preferences, as the Papua issue has been integrated into Vanuatu's normative diplomatic strategy.

The Gap between Aid and Political Influence

Findings at the public and government levels indicate a clear gap between Indonesia's increased humanitarian assistance and the resulting political influence. While humanitarian assistance contributes to maintaining bilateral relations and increasing Indonesia's presence in Vanuatu, its influence on political attitudes regarding Papua is limited. This gap confirms that humanitarian assistance, without a deeper integration of public diplomacy strategies sensitive to local identities, struggles to serve as an effective instrument of political persuasion.

Discussion: Limitations of Soft Power and Humanitarian Aid as Instruments of Public Diplomacy

The empirical findings in this study indicate that the increase in Indonesian humanitarian aid to Vanuatu is not directly proportional to changes in public attitudes or the Vanuatu government's political position on the Papua issue. This condition emphasizes the limitations of soft power when operated through humanitarian aid instruments, especially in the context of political issues that have been institutionalized normatively and identity-based. This discussion section further examines the factors explaining these limitations by integrating the frameworks of soft power, "new" public diplomacy, and classical realism.

Help Humanity and the Linear Assumptions of Soft Power

Approach soft power often leave from assumptions that improvement Power attraction and goodwill will produce change preference politics on the receiving end. However, the findings This study shows that that assumptions this does not always apply linearly. Although help Indonesian humanity contributes on the image positive as partners development and humanity, perception it is not directly automatic translated become support political to Indonesia's position on Papua.

This shows that soft power has structural limits when dealing with the issues that have been interpreted morally and politically by the recipient society. In the case of Vanuatu, Papua is perceived not only as a as issue policy outside Indonesia, but as symbol struggle decolonization and Melanesian solidarity. As a result, the power drag generated by the relief humanity tend reduced when dealing with narrative more normative strong and established.

Public Diplomacy and the Failure of Cultural Resonance

From the perspective of "new" public diplomacy, the effectiveness of diplomacy is determined not only by the intensity of communication or the amount of aid, but also by the extent to which diplomatic messages and practices resonate culturally with the target audience. This research finding indicates that Indonesian humanitarian assistance remains dominated by a state-centric approach and top-down communication, with limited involvement from local and non-state actors in Vanuatu.

These limitations have resulted in Indonesia's aid narrative being poorly integrated with local discourses on Melanesian identity and regional solidarity. Humanitarian aid is understood more as a technocratic practice than as a long-term, relational relationship. In this context, Indonesian public diplomacy has not fully utilized the potential of multi-actor collaboration, a key characteristic of contemporary public diplomacy, resulting in suboptimal persuasive influence.

National Interests and the Political Rationality of Small States

Integrating a classical realist perspective provides an additional explanation for the limited impact of humanitarian aid. From a national interest perspective, Vanuatu's stance on the Papua issue is not solely driven by a response to Indonesian policy, but by broader political and symbolic calculations. Advocacy for Papua provides Vanuatu with strategic moral standing in the South Pacific region, while strengthening its national identity and diplomatic visibility internationally.

Within this framework, the receipt of humanitarian aid from Indonesia is not seen as a determining factor in political decision-making. Instead, Vanuatu is able to separate the material benefits of aid from its political preferences regarding Papua. This finding strengthens the argument that small states are not necessarily passive to soft power influences but rather possess the agency to negotiate, filter, and even reject the political implications of the aid they receive.

Theoretical and Policy Implications

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on soft power and public diplomacy by emphasizing the importance of integrating analyses of national interests and

identity politics. These findings suggest that a soft power approach that ignores local interest structures and meanings risks generating overestimated expectations about the effectiveness of humanitarian aid. Thus, the integration of classical realism perspectives helps enrich the analysis of the limits of persuasion in international relations.

Policy-wise, these findings indicate that Indonesia's public diplomacy strategy in the South Pacific requires a more long-term, relational, and locally needs-based approach. Humanitarian aid needs to be positioned not as a sole solution to overcome political resistance, but as part of a broader diplomatic ecosystem involving civil society actors, local communities, and narratives sensitive to regional identities.

CONCLUSION

This article examines Indonesian humanitarian aid (2016–2023) as a public diplomacy tool to counter Vanuatu's support for Papuan independence amid Melanesian solidarity and decolonization narratives, finding that despite increased aid in disaster response, health facilities, and capacity building, it failed to shift strong public support or the government's consistent advocacy in international forums. Integrating soft power, "new" public diplomacy, and classical realism, the study reveals Vanuatu's agency in accepting material benefits while prioritizing identity-driven political interests for diplomatic legitimacy. Theoretically, it underscores soft power's limits against normative and symbolic commitments; policy-wise, it urges Indonesia to adopt long-term, culturally sensitive strategies involving non-state actors. Limited by access to Vanuatu's internal processes, future research could compare outcomes in other Pacific states or analyze non-state/transnational networks' roles in shaping responses to such diplomacy.

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