



Forms of humanitarian diplomacy

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Humanitarian emergencies continue to proliferate globally. Mostly driven by conflicts—but also natural hazards, climate change, famine, epidemics—these emergencies exacerbate existing social vulnerabilities and create new ones.



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Humanitarian action, intended to alleviate the suffering of the population affected by emergencies, is normally negotiated among different actors, including state authorities, armed groups, NGOs and international organisations, religious groups, etc. The aims of the negotiations, from the perspective of humanitarian actors, are to: (a) identify the major needs in a specific context or situation; (b) recognise the social groups more exposed to the emergency or more vulnerable to it; (c) establish the modalities to deliver aid; (d) guarantee access to aid for the populations in need (for example by establishing humanitarian corridors); (e) monitor the unfolding of the emergency; and (f) raise funds from a range of donors for the humanitarian assistance in a given emergency. These humanitarian negotiations can be conducted in situations of extreme insecurity and unstable political conditions and are at times explicitly described as humanitarian diplomacy, a concept that started to circulate more consistently in the early 2000s (although there are uses of this expression long before). Scholars have defined humanitarian diplomacy as a way of persuading decision-makers and opinion leaders to act at all times and in all circumstances in the interest of vulnerable people and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles, namely humanity, impartiality, independence and neutrality.

Humanitarian diplomacy generally encompasses activities carried out by humanitarian actors to obtain a space from political and military authorities within which they can function with integrity. These activities include arranging for the



presence of humanitarian organisations in a given country, negotiating access to civilian populations in need of assistance and protection, monitoring assistance programmes, promoting respect for international law and norms, and engaging in advocacy at a variety of levels in support of humanitarian objectives. In this scenario, humanitarian diplomacy is understood as a means to “leave no one behind”, as defined in the 2030 Agenda (Transforming our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development) issued by the United Nations (UN). Humanitarianism can be seen as most critical for those who are considered the worst-off in a given context and society. “Leave no one behind” is, therefore, an important ideology in humanitarian contexts as those who are considered furthest behind in peaceful and stable settings are even more vulnerable at times of conflict. Humanitarian diplomacy follows historical trajectories of humanitarian action itself. As modern-day humanitarianism in the twenty-first century is characterised by the global extent of its outreach, so has the expansion of humanitarian diplomacy and its practices reached further geographical locations and involved a larger share of stakeholders. Since the late 1980s, the scope of humanitarianism has increased significantly, following considerable professionalisation and institutionalisation

during the 1990s. These processes have had a central focus on increased capacity and enhanced delivery, which in turn has transformed previous humanitarian volunteers and amateurs into professional staff members with appropriate education and work experiences. These processes of professionalisation and institutionalisation of humanitarianism coincide with the development of more ad hoc humanitarian diplomatic engagement.

Increasing visibility and influence within different diplomatic platforms and cultures, such as political decision-making bodies like those of regional collectives (for example, the African Union, the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and international arenas (such as the UN Security Council), necessitate humanitarians for organised, strategic and professional action. To be sure, humanitarians have long engaged in practices of diplomacy but often without adopting an open, public approach or even without proper understanding of *how* they are doing diplomatic work. Donor relations, resource mobilisation, gaining political support, securing stakeholder partnerships and inter-organisational collaboration are, in essence, diplomacy. Considering the nature of today's humanitarian crises, many humanitarians aim for recognised acknowledgement and,



relatedly, continuous development of diplomatic skills, especially as they claim to represent the interests of the most vulnerable in local and global arenas with other representatives of other national and non-national forms of diplomacy.

Humanitarian diplomacy reveals the negotiated nature of humanitarianism, which is characterised by compromise and pragmatic dealings. For instance, while some practitioners defend the apolitical stance of humanitarianism, scholars have largely contested this claim, pointing out that humanitarianism cannot be considered outside its operational contexts, which are always political and imbricated in a variety of negotiated and diplomatic practices. In many cases, humanitarians are also pushed to engage in traditional, state-related forms of diplomacy when it comes to their presence and objectives. For example, UN agencies, funds, and programmes working in the humanitarian realm are able to operate in a given country context only through the permission of national governments for their territorial presence.

The identification of what exactly is considered humanitarian diplomacy remains a vivid conversation wherein the usage and definition of the term tend to range as broadly as the actors involved. Given the variety of humanitarian actors involved in complex (and often protracted) emergencies, their competing priorities and goals produce different understandings and practices of humanitarian diplomacy. Humanitarian diplomacy remains to a large extent contingent and situational; therefore, it should be understood first and foremost in its intrinsic plurality.

At the same time, understanding humanitarian diplomacy analytically through its practices offers an avenue that breaks away from actor-specific interpretations. These humanitarian diplomatic practices can be scrutinised at the level of characteristics, which include explanations of why these practices exist, what they are, who they include, where they take place and how they are implemented. In short,

humanitarian diplomatic practices are recognised as being part of humanitarian action, which is often, but not always, driven by humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law. These practices constitute various engagements with several stakeholders that are determined by the context within which humanitarian interests are at stake. For example, given that most of the world's humanitarian needs are driven by armed conflicts, humanitarian diplomatic practices include, unlike several other forms of diplomacy, non-state armed groups as stakeholders. These practices have discursive and material elements combining the semantic fields of humanitarianism (e.g. represented by officials from humanitarian organisations, their logos, and humanitarian aid itself) and diplomacy (e.g. represented by meeting rooms, resolutions and letters, and political dialogue).

The practice-based approach also facilitates the conceptualisation of humanitarian diplomacy in the framework of the broader pluralisation of diplomacy. Indeed, the use and conceptualisation of diplomatic practices has extended far beyond the state system simultaneously with processes such as globalisation, multilateralism and technological advancements. Understanding diplomacy only in its traditional sense, as monopolised by states and international institutions such as the UN and the European Union, does not adequately reflect the reality of today's diplomatic practices and infrastructures. Clearly, the idea that diplomacy is exclusive to sovereignty and statecraft is incorrect and misleading. The articulation of global challenges, such as conflicts, environmental catastrophes and displacement, cannot be simply reduced to the concern of state actors to which traditional diplomacy could cater. Diplomacy is essentially plural and operated within networks of different actors with diverse interests, identities, and understandings of what the world is (or how it should be) and how it works. There are significant differences, both in terms of positioning and outcomes, in the way humanitarian diplomacy is used by

states as part of their foreign policy and by humanitarian organisations. Whereas states do engage in humanitarian issues, their operational priority and strategic precedence stem from national policies, such as those related to foreign and security frameworks. Those interests might or might not align with humanitarian interests in various contexts. A state might be a military aggressor, which generates humanitarian needs in one context, and at the same time a humanitarian aid provider in the same or another setting. States also have an option to withdraw their humanitarian engagement, a choice that humanitarian organisations do not have in the same manner as the representation of humanitarian interest constitutes their respective mandates. Therefore, humanitarian diplomacy can be labelled as 'humanitarianism as diplomacy' when it comes to states' approaches, policies and practices.

As both humanitarian and diplomatic affairs represent social worlds, social categories also exist within humanitarian diplomacy. Gender is one of these, which sets certain limitations and opportunities relatedly. In terms of humanitarianism, and particularly in conflict contexts, gender positions people differently: men dominate but do not entirely constitute the practices of soldiering, fighting and physical aggression. Whereas they represent the majority of combatant casualties, the civilian equivalents are mainly represented by women and children. Gender-based violence in conflicts, for example, is an element to consider in the definition of humanitarian needs. These perspectives are potentially neglected should humanitarian diplomacy draw from gendered patterns that stem from traditional male dominance in diplomacy and representation of masculine humanitarian narratives, such as 'risk', 'security' and 'non-familial'. Humanitarian diplomatic spaces might embody mainly male bodies, particularly in interactions with non-state armed groups, forging women's experiences, perspectives and representatives into minority positions which, in humanitarian terms, they are not. Therefore, gender as an analytical

category needs to be carefully considered in humanitarian action and, similarly, in humanitarian diplomacy as an integral part of it.

As massive humanitarian emergencies, such as those in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Myanmar and Ukraine continue to show, humanitarian action itself is a target of parties engaged in conflict. Access to humanitarian aid is increasingly challenged in ways that redefine the role of humanitarian actors and their diplomatic capacity. The character of violent conflict has changed, and the politicisation of aid

policies and practices has become an integral element of conflict itself. With all their inherent political dimensions, understanding such situations implies recognising the situated, interconnected and multilayered nature of conflict and crisis. Humanitarian diplomacy can be seen as a crucial component of such political scenarios wherein humanitarians might be well positioned for meaningful interventions.

Discover more about the [**Humanitarian Diplomacy project**](#)

PROJECT NAME

Humanitarian Diplomacy: Assessing Policies, Practices and Impact of New Forms of Humanitarian Action and Foreign Policy

PROJECT SUMMARY

The project aims to study the policies, practices and impact of humanitarian diplomacy as conducted by state actors and international organisations. This study is of crucial importance to understand the effects of the growing overlap between humanitarian efforts and states' foreign policy and the different ways humanitarian diplomacy is used to address complex emergencies and crises.

PROJECT LEAD PROFILE

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