

Humanitarian negotiations and diplomacy

Antonio De Lauri, Research Professor at Chr. Michelsen Institute, discusses the purpose of humanitarian negotiations, diplomacy and the ethics of border control

Since at least the mid-nineteenth century, humanitarian negotiations and relief has spread worldwide to become a global salvific narrative.

Today, this is captured in the notion of “humanitarianism”—in which the suffix “ism” embodies a whole set of beliefs, practices, categories, discourses, and procedures that, although flexible and apt to change quickly, are recognizable as “humanitarian.”

Humanitarianism is manifested in a plurality of actions, movements, and ethics that are different in their implementation and expression and yet are coherent in their idealistic intentions. While these intentions build on core humanitarian principles such as “neutrality,” “independence,” “humanity,” and “impartiality”, they go beyond these to define a modern redemptory attitude that is expressed in forms of compassion and government. Indeed, humanitarianism is not simply a reaction to crisis but a vast, articulated, evolving, and multiscale mesh of different actors, politics, and structures.

It is a modality of intervention (with the aim of improving the world), a global ethos that is driven by a call to address human needs in extraordinary, unbalanced, or unequal circumstances. As such, it constitutes a consistent and important feature of modernity, and its history is intertwined with ideas and practices of salvation and liberation.

What are the aims of humanitarian actors?

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. Indeed, humanitarian action 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 (1) identify the major needs in a specific context or situation, (2) recognise the social groups more exposed to the emergency or more vulnerable to it, (3) establish the modalities to deliver aid, (4) guarantee access to aid for the populations in need, (5) identify specific forms of protection (for example by establishing humanitarian corridors), (6) monitor the unfolding of the emergency, and (7) raise funds from a range of donors.

These humanitarian negotiations can be conducted at a higher political level or in situations of extreme insecurity and unstable political conditions. In some circumstances, they are 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). In contemporary political thought, the use and conceptualisation of diplomatic practices have extended far beyond the state system.

How does diplomacy play a role?

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 statecraft is incorrect and misleading. Diplomacy is a plural business 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.

The variety of humanitarian actors involved in complex emergencies and their competing priorities and goals produce different understandings and practices of humanitarian diplomacy. Therefore, its definitions and perceived content vary significantly among different actors and operational contexts.

Humanitarianism and Borders

Borders are sites of intense humanitarian action and, by consequence, ongoing negotiations and diplomacy. A world without borders continues to represent the mantra of globalization proponents, whether they be large corporations or humanitarian organizations. And yet we see today a proliferation of walls and fences, which exacerbate inequality and symbolize the affirmation of a privileged few who actually live the promise of globalization to the detriment of others.

The crisis of borders in the so-called Western democracies has exploded into the public domain because of their inability to control flows of migrants and refugees or to stop terrorists. In addition to exacerbating security policies, this "crisis" has ideologically and politically justified the affirmation of humanitarian borders as zones where practices of aid and rescue have merged with policing and rejection. The 2015 migration reception crisis, for example, did not simply make explicit the dysfunctionality of Europe's asylum system, but it also made evident how the narrative of rescue became a component of border governance. On the ground, migrant safety continues to be undermined by policies that further securitize and militarize borders.

Border at Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico © Leszek Wrona

By redefining certain territories as "humanitarian zones," humanitarianism actualizes a new geography of spaces governed through the logic of emergency and relief. This is the case for many borders today in Europe, the United States, the Middle East, Australia, and Africa. In Europe, for instance, the multiplication of border barriers, detention centres,

and shelters, on the one hand, and the intensification of border patrols, maritime control, and deportations, on the other, signal a new step in European border history: the humanitarianization of European borders as zones affected by severe crisis.

Border control has often authorised violent practices

Historically, border control has been implemented with the mandate of maintaining state sovereignty over defined territorial spaces through the regulation of the mobility of people, animals and objects transiting across state borders; that is, into and out of controlled state territories. To this end, border control has authorised policies and practices that range from the restriction and denial of movement to physical force enacted by border guards.

With the rise of humanitarian borders, the politics of bordering has increasingly overlapped with practices of confinement (helping refugees and migrants in their “home countries”) and containment. In such a historical context, the externalisation of European borders and policies of rejection have been framed as actions of compassionate control and as a response to crisis and insecurity. Patrolling coasts, expanding the reach of immigrant reception centres, or fencing territories have thus become humanitarian reactions to migrant and refugee emergencies, and, by extension, to border crises.

Today, the reciprocal relationship between humanitarian search-and- rescue operations and state performances on European borders reproduces, on European territory, a dynamic that humanitarian militarism around the world has best embodied for decades: the overlapping of rescue and global policing. This modality of using humanitarianism as a pretext for border politics requires a renewed process of confrontation about how notions such as “crisis” and “emergency” are politically exploited for means that do not align with humanitarian principles.

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