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Barbed wire around the port of Melilla to prevent migrants' access, mostly minors, who seek to sneak into one of the ships to reach the Peninsula. Photo: Manon André.

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## Everyday humanitarian diplomacy: Experiences from border areas

The term humanitarian diplomacy (HD) emerged in early 2000s. HD recognises the role of humanitarian actors when negotiating access, assistance and protection for civilians in situations of extreme insecurity and armed conflict. It is often considered distinct from “traditional” or “conventional” diplomacy because it involves activities carried out by humanitarian actors, as opposed to diplomacy carried out by state diplomats. Its singularity derives from the fact that it is humanitarian and thus by definition outside of politics.<sup>1</sup> De Lauri asks whether HD is an oxymoron since it holds a tension between the ideal intention of working for universal principles and the need to take into account the interests of specific political actors.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> (Smith, 2007)

<sup>2</sup> (De Lauri, 2018)

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In a broad sense, HD can be defined "as persuading decision makers and leaders to act, at all times and in all circumstances, in the interest of vulnerable people and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles".<sup>3</sup> A main feature of HD is exactly to understand what the interests of vulnerable people are in practice. However, we cannot always take for granted that HD is achieved with full respect to the core humanitarian principles (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence). In fact, this is an aspect that constantly needs to be addressed.

This policy brief argues that HD is not distinct from other forms of diplomacy. HD is a manifestation of the pluralisation of modern diplomacy. Modern diplomacy operates not only through a variety of practices and actors in institutional settings, but also in an ever-increasing variety of spaces in daily life activities. Everyday humanitarian diplomacy such as, for example, the practice of accompanying and representing border crossers vis-a-vis state and transnational authorities is a form of diplomacy conducted to support migrants and refugees in detention centres, in refugee camps, in conflict zones, in post-war environments and along borders. This brief uses the work of the humanitarian organisations Jesuit Migrant Service (JMS) and Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) at the Spanish autonomous border city of Melilla as an example of everyday humanitarian diplomacy in defence of the human rights of forcibly displaced persons and other border crossers. JMS and JRS humanitarian missions act in favour of migrants and negotiate with national and international political entities. Although their work differ from what is usually defined as HD, I argue that their diplomacy is about representing the interest of the most vulnerable towards decision makers and leaders, and thus it represents a form of HD in its broad sense.

### Everyday diplomacy

Critical theories of diplomacy suggest that contemporary transformations of diplomacy can be largely characterised as a process of "pluralisation".<sup>4</sup> These perspectives propose a conception of diplomacy that goes beyond the practices exclusively carried out by state diplomatic services, to include actions of a variety of actors such as NGOs, civil society, and individuals in general.<sup>5</sup> Critical approaches to diplomacy show that the transformations that

diplomacy is undergoing exposes the changes in the international system in which diplomacy is immersed.

The Oxford Dictionary includes two meanings of diplomacy. First, as the activity of managing relations between different countries. Second, as the skill in dealing with people in difficult situations without upsetting or offending them. The academic literature on diplomacy generally concentrates its definition on the semantic field of international relations between states, and ignores this second interpersonal definition. Cornago<sup>6</sup> argues that definitions of diplomacy centred on relations between states shows a resistance to acknowledge that diplomacy is a particularly stylised expression of social relations. In contrast to views focusing on the importance of inter-state negotiations as the fundamental element of diplomacy, Cornago draws on the history of diplomacy to highlight the plurality of roles adopted by diplomatic intermediaries and the variety of services they undertook for the political, social and religious communities to which they belonged. Through the work of different authors of diplomatic history, he illustrates how diplomats understood their role more as cultural mediators than as representatives of a specific political interest. Mutual discovery and understanding of cultural differences emerge as a crucial aspect of diplomacy, argues Cornago.

Although diplomatic practices occur daily, the everydayness and normality of diplomacy are not easily recognised. Diplomacy in a broad sense emerges when someone successfully claims to represent and negotiate for a territory or a group of persons or a cause, or when mediating between others who participate in such representations and negotiations. Diplomacy in daily life ceases to be a special professional or technical skill, and rather captures a broader range of social activities.<sup>7</sup> Everyday diplomacy, like diplomacy in general, can sometimes simply be day-to-day intermediation work. The Jesuit Migration Service (JMS) in Melilla carries out everyday diplomacy through different kinds of actions like gaining access to an ex officio lawyer for a person seeking international protection or supporting unaccompanied minors. This is a form of diplomacy, which also includes awareness-raising efforts to influence the public administration to reconsider its decisions.

### Everyday humanitarian diplomacy at the spanish southern border

Melilla is at the European migratory crossroads, located at the Southern Border of Spain, a territory of the European Union contiguous to Morocco.<sup>8</sup> The management of Spain's Southern Border falls within the scope of the European policy of externalisation and control of its external borders, and is thus part of an overall global process of containing unwanted migration. This process has been accompanied by a constant erosion of the rights of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to enter and settle

<sup>3</sup> De Lauri, 2018: 1.

<sup>4</sup> Cornago, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Constantinou, Kerr and Sharp, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Constantinou, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> The concept of Southern Border refers to the points of access to Spanish territory for South-North migratory movements that cross the African continent. Land access occurs through the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla.



The door to Europe, Lampedusa. Photo by Ron Dauphin on Unsplash.

in Europe. Melilla is a “humanitarian border”<sup>9</sup> in the complex web of the European policy of externalisation and control of borders.<sup>10</sup>

Rights for migrants and refugees in the city are simultaneously guaranteed and violated: cases of summary returns on the land border; peculiarities of operations of the security forces in adjacent waters; returns of people landed on islets and rocks through the readmission agreement signed with Morocco in 1992; various problems of migrants during their stay in Melilla; restriction of asylum seekers’ free movement; and finally, the reality affecting unaccompanied foreign minors and young people who come of age.<sup>11</sup> Here, big humanitarian agencies do not arrive, instead organisations such as the Jesuit Migrant Service (JMS) and the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) work to defend the interests of the most vulnerable migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

The JMS and the JRS are Catholic organisations that operate in a network for the defence of the rights of migrants and their full access to citizenship while promoting hospitality. These activities occur through accompaniment, which are personal and collective processes of social incorporation, personal empowerment and social and community participation. JMS began its mediation work on behalf of migrants towards the Spanish and Moroccan authorities at the Southern Border of Spain in the “fence crisis” in 2005. By joining forces with other organisations, they sought to prevent sub-Saharan African migrants and refugees from being

deported from the areas around Ceuta and Melilla to Algeria and Mauritania border points in the Sahara Desert. Since 2006, JMS has together with JRS sought to be present on North African migration routes committed to combat the externalisation of migration control beyond the European Union borders. They have given particular attention to the border transit between Nador and Melilla within the broader context of the Spanish Southern Border. Their humanitarian mission in favour of migrants is an ongoing negotiation with national and international political agendas.

The JMS and JRS idea of accompaniment translates in a form of everyday diplomacy, which implies being present in the daily lives of migrants and refugees wherever they live. Accompaniment is a way of being, of sharing everyday life.<sup>12</sup> It is about “reaching refugees through hospitality, welcoming them and making them feel at home in the community where they have sought refuge, and accepting their hospitality in return”.<sup>13</sup> Mark Cachia, speaking about working with asylum seekers in the JRS Welcome network in France, underlines the idea of accompaniment “as a mutual recognition of each other’s humanity”. This everyday diplomacy can be understood from an alternative, spiritual and transforming perspective that sees diplomacy as conducted by an intermediary defined by Constantinou as *homo-diplomacy*.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, the diplomacy of accompaniment of the SJR is not a professional job but rather a lived experience.

9 De Lauri, 2019.

10 CEAR, 2017; Johnson and Jones, 2018; Vaughan-Williams, 2015.

11 JMS, 2018.

12 Gavin and Vella, 2013.

13 Gavin and Vella, 2013: 18.

14 Constantinou, 2006.

Irregular migrants and the most vulnerable asylum seekers whose cases are not dealt with by the State, arrive at the headquarters of the JMS in Melilla.<sup>15</sup> The daily work of the JMS consists of “listen to, provide reliable information on the legal-administrative situation and the resources to assert a right or a claim, and accompany the administrative bodies in which to carry out the relevant procedures”.<sup>16</sup> We can easily draw a parallel between the consular practices of the JMS and the daily activity that diplomats assume as agents of the State when they implement the classic function of protecting their national interests. In this case, however, it is not a State that is represented, but the most vulnerable migrants.

## Conclusion

Everyday diplomacy such as accompanying border crossers through the encounter with state authorities and national and international laws shows that HD is not distinct from other forms of modern diplomacy. Critical approaches to diplomacy reveal HD as a manifestation of the process of pluralisation of modern diplomatic practices and highlight other HD practices outside the spotlight. The work of JMS and JRS is an example of everyday diplomacy, which results in being present in the daily lives of migrants and refugees. Besides HD practices concerned with improving access to humanitarian aid in conflict and complex emergencies, it is important to acknowledge humanitarian diplomatic practices generated in new humanitarian spaces such as European borders. Everyday diplomacy is a people-centred approach embracing the dignity of the person and represents the core principle of humanity.

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<sup>15</sup> See the report *Sacar del Laberinto*, pp. 19–51.

<sup>16</sup> JMS, 2019: 18.