

# Humanitarian Diplomatic Practices

*Salla Turunen*

Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) and the University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway  
*salla.turunen@cmi.no*

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## Summary

*Humanitarian diplomacy* is a new term, yet an old practice, and has received relatively little academic attention. This contrasts with the reality of humanitarian practitioners' work, which has shown increasing interest in and use of the term *humanitarian diplomacy* from the millennium onwards. Humanitarian diplomacy covers humanitarian action and its intricacies in catering for humanitarian needs, which sets it distinctively apart from other forms of diplomacy. In contributing to this underexplored area, in a theoretically driven discussion this article uses practice theory to propose an analytical framework for *humanitarian diplomatic practices*. The article suggests that humanitarian diplomacy, as currently led by practitioners, can be best understood by examining its characteristics at the level of its practices. This understanding produces a systematisation of the meaning of the term for scholarly audiences and assists practitioners themselves to identify their humanitarian diplomatic engagement as a self-standing practice.

## Keywords

humanitarian diplomacy – international relations – interpretative constructivism – practice theory

## 1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>

[The World Food Programme] WFP has been successfully employing humanitarian diplomacy for decades — Yet we have yet to capture these skills and knowledge and make them a core competency among all of our staff and partners.<sup>2</sup>

Humanitarianism cannot be understood and analysed without its connection to diplomacy as a sculptor of its possibilities and limitations.<sup>3</sup> As a label for crafting this space for humanitarian interaction, the concept of humanitarian diplomacy has surfaced. *Humanitarian diplomacy* is a relatively new term but an old practice, as noted by the senior WFP official quoted above.<sup>4</sup> However, it has yet to be established in its terminological prevalence and it faces a degree of contestation: merging two established semantic fields into one — those of humanitarianism and diplomacy — can create obfuscation. The reasons why such concept formations are important are that they clarify meaning, establish informative and productive connections between original meanings, enable constellations of related terms and set the concept in relation to similar hierarchies.<sup>5</sup> These reasons also apply to the case of humanitarian diplomacy.

Humanitarian diplomacy is an independent form of diplomatic engagement even where traditional state diplomats engage in humanitarian issues.<sup>6</sup> This is due to its distinctive claim for humanitarian imperative<sup>7</sup> and engagement with a variety of stakeholders, including armed groups,<sup>8</sup> which traditional forms of diplomacy more commonly neglect. Humanitarian diplomacy is most often practised by humanitarians themselves, despite their not necessarily realising this in full.<sup>9</sup> In its current conceptual formation, the term has attracted

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2 Senior WFP official, as quoted in Minear 2007, 27-28.

3 Sending 2015, 257; see also Clements 2020, 3.

4 Senior WFP official, as quoted in Minear 2007, 27-28; see also O'Hagan 2016, 657.

5 Collier, LaPorte and Seawright 2012, 222.

6 Smith and Minear 2007b, 1.

7 Minear 2007, 33. For definition of 'humanitarian imperative', see IFRC 1994.

8 Clements 2020, 3.

9 Smith and Minear 2007a; Clements 2020, 137-140.

relatively little academic attention.<sup>10</sup> Humanitarian diplomacy entered the international discussion in the 1990s, and gained attention, mostly with practitioners, from the turn of the millennium onwards. Therefore, humanitarian diplomacy needs to be understood, at this stage, first and foremost from an emic perspective. Against this background, this article argues that humanitarian diplomacy can be best analysed through a focus on its practices. It discusses how humanitarian diplomacy can be conceptualised through its practices, and what kind of characteristics these practices have. This article breaks new ground in proposing an analytical framework for what can be understood as *humanitarian diplomatic practices*.

Such an understanding is relevant to practitioners and academics alike. For practitioners, and as quoted above, this article addresses the ambiguity of what is considered as humanitarian diplomacy. Further, it argues that if humanitarian diplomatic practices are integrated into humanitarian action in a cognisant and reflective manner in contrast to their current ad hoc instrumentalisation, they play an important role in the creation of 'humanitarian space'.<sup>11</sup> The delivery of humanitarian aid takes place in increasingly challenging and political environments in which humanitarian diplomacy can be used as a vehicle for navigating them. For example, in creating a humanitarian space in highly politicised settings, an important practice of humanitarian diplomacy is to increase knowledge on the types of assistance provided to people in need of humanitarian assistance.<sup>12</sup> This type of awareness-raising is relevant for beneficiaries, belligerents and other stakeholders alike.

Departing from a political premise for humanitarian diplomacy is a contested claim. Defending humanitarianism as an apolitical practice is an active strategy to create humanitarian space.<sup>13</sup> Fear of the politicisation of humanitarianism arises from the potential of politicised humanitarianism to hamper and impede humanitarian action. Many humanitarian actors do not acknowledge this political interpretation of humanitarianism, which at times results in grave consequences, as other stakeholders may still interpret humanitarian interventions in political terms. Attacks against humanitarian workers in line with 'you help my enemy, you become my enemy' are examples. Breaking this apolitical illusion can be also labelled 'neo-humanitarianism'.<sup>14</sup> Another important notion is that humanitarian diplomacy can be used to serve purposes

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10 Kirecci 2015, 2; Clements 2020, 172.

11 Hilhorst and Jansen 2010.

12 Minear 2007, 21.

13 Barnett 2009, 623.

14 Mills 2005, 162; see also 'new humanitarianism' in Mascarenhas 2017, 4-7.

other than altruistic ends. It is not immune from ‘strong sensitivity to donors’ prerogatives and the obligation to follow the media spotlight’,<sup>15</sup> from political interventionism in disguise of humanitarianism<sup>16</sup> or from various types of competition between humanitarian actors.<sup>17</sup> As often in the case of humanitarian needs, the gravity of the need is set in relation to the available resources and multilateral support. Modulated by considerations such as danger, difficulty and expense, humanitarian need becomes a subjective estimate, failing to match human ideals with human conditions.<sup>18</sup>

Whether humanitarianism is considered as political or not, it cannot be separated from its operational contexts, which are political and benefit from various diplomatic practices. Humanitarians often engage in diplomacy without understanding that they are doing so (e.g., during technical and operational implementation), which can jeopardise humanitarian aims.<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, entering into the diplomatic role with reluctance can mean being ‘less than optimally effective in meeting humanitarian needs.’<sup>20</sup> Rather than avoiding humanitarianism’s political context, this article suggests that the shift in focus should be towards how to best navigate the political web of humanitarian actors, while being cognisant of the internal and external political interests at play. Herein, humanitarian diplomacy is a central element that can be used to avoid the emergence of humanitarian disasters in the first place, as well as to reach people in need of humanitarian aid.

As for scholars, understanding humanitarian diplomacy through its practices is helpful in systematising their study and the discussion on the pluralisation of diplomacy with its conceptually new forms and terminology. In bringing practice theory in relation to humanitarian diplomacy to the fore, this article emphasises aspects previously not reflected in the literature. Diplomacy, as understood in a traditional, state-centric sense, is one of the most researched areas in practice theory in the scholarship of international relations (IR).<sup>21</sup> This lack of analysis of ‘new’ diplomatic practices in IR’s ‘practice turn’ has

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15 Pandolfi and Rousseau 2016, 18.

16 Fassin 2007, 508.

17 Stephenson 2005, 337-338.

18 De Waal 2010, S133.

19 Smith 2007, 58.

20 Smith 2007, 58.

21 See, for example, Neumann 2002; Pouliot 2010, 2016; Sending, Pouliot and Neumann 2011, 2015; Cornut 2015; Lequesne 2015; Wiseman 2015; Bicchi and Bremberg 2016; Bueger and Gadinger 2018, 1-6; Banks 2019; Wille 2019.

also been acknowledged by Andrew Cooper and Jérémie Cornut,<sup>22</sup> who call for contemporary and polylateral understanding and analysis.<sup>23</sup>

By focusing on practice theory in this article, the author does not claim this theory to be the only applicable approach in understanding humanitarian diplomacy and its practices.<sup>24</sup> In the humanitarian context, practice theory can be even critiqued for reducing meanings to their most functional and instrumental forms.<sup>25</sup> Whereas practice theorists have also been criticised for their focus on stability and continuity versus change and innovation, this limitation can be, to a certain extent, overcome when focusing on conceptually new practices<sup>26</sup> such as humanitarian diplomacy. Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot and Iver Neumann identify the need for analytical categories in studying diplomacy that provide both distance and clarity, particularly when diplomacy itself as a concept cannot offer these.<sup>27</sup> This article argues for the need to move beyond the 'analytical categories of diplomacy' when they are understood in the sense of traditional, state-dependent path of diplomacy, as the author sees them offering more limitations than opportunities. Rather, the article suggests moving into self-standing practices of diplomacy such as humanitarian diplomacy. Here, practice theory offers a unique reification of the abstract as it discovers 'the quotidian unfolding of international life'.<sup>28</sup> At its various levels, practices, as understood in practice theory, are valuable insights into humanitarian diplomatic spaces as they not only illustrate the manifestation of humanitarianism today but also influence the humanitarianism of tomorrow, cultivating ideas, producing devices and platforms and developing practitioners themselves.<sup>29</sup>

This article categorises practice theory as a form of interpretative constructivism and, as such, it has been discussed as an umbrella term for social scientific approaches that seek to explain social phenomena through the focus

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22 Cooper and Cornut 2019, 301; see also Pouliot and Cornut 2015.

23 The term 'frontline diplomacy' captures an essential overlap from the practitioners' field perspective with humanitarian diplomacy. Cooper and Cornut 2019, 300-301.

24 Other interesting candidates from the field of IR include, for example: discourse analysis, particularly given the linguistic construction of both humanitarianism and diplomacy; game theory in assessing relations, patterns and intersubjectivity; process-tracing in exploring mechanically the emergence of practices and social change; and institutional perspectives and comparative case studies to unravel actor-specific behaviour.

25 Barnett 2018, 317.

26 Cooper and Cornut 2019, 307-309.

27 Sending, Pouliot and Neumann 2011, 532.

28 Adler and Pouliot 2011, 1.

29 Mascarenhas 2017; see also Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado and Henig 2016.

on practices.<sup>30</sup> As epistemologically interpretivist, practice theory is not to be understood as an ubiquitous theory but, rather, as a variety of theories focused on practices.<sup>31</sup> These include, for example, Pierre Bourdieu's praxeology, management studies' and organisational sociology's ideas on communities of practice, Theodore Schatzki's philosophical account of social practices and actor-network theory.<sup>32</sup> Practices have also been approached through narratives and Foucauldian understandings of textuality and discourse analysis,<sup>33</sup> and in the same vein 'practice turn' has been discussed in relation to 'linguistic turn' in the IR literature.<sup>34</sup>

Of the various approaches to practices, this article employs an understanding of practice theory provided by Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot,<sup>35</sup> prominent proponents of practice theory who suggest that practices are socially competent performances that give meaning to international action.<sup>36</sup> The reason why this article turns to their practice ontology is that it stems from a tradition of practice theory that is primarily interested in the international level of world politics, a context to which contemporary humanitarianism and humanitarian diplomacy inherently belong. Furthermore, Adler and Pouliot's approach moves beyond text and its meaning and materiality into ideas, relationship-building and political dynamics, which this article considers to be relevant in interpreting humanitarian diplomatic practices. Adler and Pouliot argue that practices 'can be appraised through different levels of aggregation' in which, 'methodologically speaking, sense making and situatedness are particularly important aspects of the study of international practices'.<sup>37</sup> As such, humanitarian diplomacy can be understood as one practice vis-à-vis other diplomatic practices. For the sake of the analysis in defining what humanitarian diplomacy is, this article aggregates a set of humanitarian diplomatic practices to describe the existence of the overall phenomenon.

This article has two main sections. Section 2 discusses humanitarian diplomacy as its own category of diplomatic practice. Here, it provides a rationale for why humanitarian diplomacy should be treated as its own category

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30 See, for example, Schatzki, Knorr Cetina and Von Savigny 2001; Adler and Pouliot 2011; McCourt 2016; Bueger and Gadinger 2018.

31 McCourt 2016, 482; Bueger and Gadinger 2018.

32 Pierre Bourdieu and Theodore Schatzk, as discussed in Bueger and Gadinger 2018, 35-44, 59-67.

33 Bueger and Gadinger 2018, 44-51.

34 See, for example, Neumann 2002, 627-638.

35 Adler and Pouliot 2011.

36 Adler and Pouliot 2011, 1.

37 Adler and Pouliot 2011, 8.

of analysis and what makes this type of diplomatic practice a humanitarian one. In mapping the practitioner field, this discussion also selects state actors' and organisations' subjective interpretations of humanitarian diplomacy. In Section 3, the article proposes an analytic framework for humanitarian diplomatic practices. It suggests that humanitarian diplomatic practices can be understood through five basic characteristics: 'why' humanitarian diplomatic practices take place, 'what' they mean, 'who' they include, 'where' they occur and 'how' they are done. Here, the article illustrates that practice theory can be a serviceable approach in reifying humanitarian diplomacy through the focus on its practices, contributing a useful analytical understanding for both scholarly and practitioners' work.

## 2 Defining Humanitarian Diplomacy

Is there more than one type of diplomacy? If so, on what grounds are the types defined? This article's point of departure is that, whereas states remain powerful actors and recognised diplomatic entities, the employment of diplomatic practices has extended far beyond the Westphalian state system. Understanding diplomacy in only its traditional sense, as monopolised by states and, at times, international institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union, does not adequately reflect the reality of today's diplomatic practices. A portrayal of diplomacy that is exclusive to sovereignty and statecraft is, in practice and theory, increasingly untenable.<sup>38</sup> The complexity of global challenges, such as climate change and refugee flows, cannot be reduced to the concern of only a handful of state actors to which traditional diplomacy could cater.

Diplomacy is 'an inherently plural business' within a 'social world composed of different actors with different interests, identities, and understandings of what the world is, how it works, and how it might work'.<sup>39</sup> This article also argues for the plurality of diplomatic practices — not only are these meaningful for analytical purposes but different diplomatic practices also reflect unique features that set them apart from one another, and they cannot be adequately explored under one approach. This kind of 'diplomatisation of the subaltern' has tendencies such as informality, privatisation and usage of multiple tracks.<sup>40</sup> Whereas traditional forms of diplomacy between states with state diplomats

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38 Constantinou 2013, 141-142, 2016, 3; Constantinou, Kerr and Sharp 2016, 3-6.

39 Constantinou, Kerr and Sharp 2016, 5.

40 Constantinou 2016, 21.

remain, new convergencies of diplomacy and diplomatic practices have emerged along with developments of, for example, globalisation, multilateralism and technology.

Today's diplomatic practices are often built on a multi-stakeholdership model that nourishes intersubjectivity.<sup>41</sup> In responding to the plethora of global challenges that demand a scope of resources over which no single actor has sole possession or monopoly, contemporary diplomacy is characterised by networks and interrelationships of state and non-state actors.<sup>42</sup> Various actors engage in meaning-making of the diplomatic reality, contesting and competing to influence policies and discourse in their favour.<sup>43</sup> With this in mind, Costas Constantinou, Noé Cornago and Fiona McConnell propose the term 'transprofessional diplomacy',<sup>44</sup> where diplomacy and its various aspects are found in different occupations rather than limited to a single vocation of state diplomats. This need for diversification of what is understood as diplomatic practices emerges from intensified global interconnections and, relatedly, expanded diplomatic space. This expanded space calls for an open, dynamic and interdisciplinary understanding of diplomatic accounts.<sup>45</sup>

To identify these changes in diplomatic practices, a new set of descriptive terms have entered the discussion.<sup>46</sup> These include, for example, non-governmental organisation diplomacy, digital diplomacy, public diplomacy, celebrity diplomacy, small states diplomacy, military diplomacy and business diplomacy. Accordingly, humanitarian diplomacy has also emerged terminologically to describe diplomatic practices that claim to advance humanitarian interests and goals.<sup>47</sup> The "new diplomacy" literature<sup>48</sup> faces a degree of contestation and scepticism as being too actor specific and lacking relational understanding with traditional forms of diplomacy and power play.<sup>49</sup> This critique can be seen as unnecessarily limiting what is understood as diplomacy and diplomatic practices. Representing global causes, mediating between polities and engaging in 'everyday diplomacy'<sup>50</sup> at various levels are examples of

41 Also discussed as 'network diplomacy'. See Cooper, Heine and Thakur 2013, 21-25; Heine 2013, 54-69.

42 Hocking 2006.

43 Cooper and Cornut 2019, 307.

44 Constantinou, Cornago and McConnell 2016, 1.

45 Constantinou, Cornago and McConnell 2016.

46 Contestation of what is diplomacy and what can be considered new is alternatively rather an old discussion, as highlighted by Sending 2015, 256.

47 O'Hagan 2016, 658-659.

48 Sending, Pouliot and Neumann 2011, 534.

49 Sending, Pouliot and Neumann 2011, 529; see also Sending, Pouliot and Neumann 2015.

50 Constantinou 2016, 2.



diplomatic practices that are outside of the state-centric diplomatic practice.<sup>51</sup> State diplomacy can be a part of and cater for these too, yet it fails to exclusively capture and embody the range in which these diplomatic practices occur.

What makes diplomacy humanitarian and sets humanitarian diplomacy as its own form of diplomatic practice is its focus on humanitarianism and humanitarian aims. Humanitarianism, as conventionally understood, strives to follow idealistic logics of neutrality, impartiality and independence in the name of shared humanity — logics that do not apply to traditional state diplomacy<sup>52</sup> or to the lion's share of other forms of diplomacy. Despite the fact that humanitarian intervention<sup>53</sup> has entailed an impression of 'idolatry and blind trust in its ostensibly salvific goals' since its beginning,<sup>54</sup> humanitarianism does not represent a neutral discourse or occur in a political vacuum.<sup>55</sup> This relation between humanitarianism and the political creates a need for engagement, which is where diplomacy comes in. Outside academic debates of what is or is not diplomacy, and of what kind, humanitarian diplomacy continues to be used and referred to by practitioners. As humanitarian diplomacy in its current form should be understood from an emic perspective, various institutional actors, state actors and non-official actors employ humanitarian diplomacy, as humanitarian diplomacy is 'multi-functional owing to the fact that it is used by different types of actors, whether official or not'.<sup>56</sup>

Due to the lack of a commonly agreed definition, the current *modus operandi* of humanitarian diplomacy allows for various strategic premises and procedures, and disparities remain in notions of how humanitarian diplomacy itself should be conducted.<sup>57</sup> Before moving to humanitarian diplomatic practices themselves, below this article briefly maps different understandings of 'humanitarian diplomacy'. These are indicated to give context and shed light on approaches to humanitarian diplomacy. However, comparing the arguments of this article with a practice theoretical approach, the author found that these conceptualisations give a sense of direction but lack a certain level of clarity and terminological proof of concept. This applies to both institutional

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51 Constantinou, Cornago and McConnell 2016; Constantinou 2016; see also Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado and Henig 2016.

52 Clements 2020, 174.

53 Alternatively, and more profoundly, lies the question of the essential need for humanitarian diplomacy in the first place. Weiss 2012, 156-157, discusses 'a humanitarian identity crisis' in which essential debates, such as 'whether outside assistance actually helps or hinders conflict management', are taking place in the humanitarian community.

54 De Lauri 2016, 1.

55 Barnett and Weiss 2011, 20.

56 Régnier 2011, 1222.

57 Régnier 2011, 1213; see also De Lauri 2018.

and state actors, where the latter are steered by national foreign and security policy interests. In understanding how humanitarian diplomacy manifests in the world, the author argues in Section 3 that looking into humanitarian diplomatic practices gives a better sense of what humanitarian diplomacy is than what the current definitions can provide, although they are useful in actor-specific interpretations.

Perhaps the most widely used definition of humanitarian diplomacy is the one offered by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), suggesting that *humanitarian diplomacy* involves ‘persuading decision makers and opinion leaders to act, at all times, in the interests of vulnerable people, and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles.’<sup>58</sup> This definition has been critiqued due to its being based on the IFRC’s work<sup>59</sup> and its broadness in lacking distinction ‘between advocacy or communication and diplomacy itself.’<sup>60</sup> Another institutional humanitarian actor, the UN, has not provided a definition of humanitarian diplomacy in its terminology, potentially signalling lack of integration.<sup>61</sup> Its contextual understanding can be partially traced through its staff members. Jan Egeland, former UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, sees humanitarian affairs as ‘diplomacy’s ground zero’,<sup>62</sup> signalling a fundamental connection between humanitarianism and diplomacy. More clearly, Egeland describes humanitarian diplomacy as, ‘to a large extent, the art of facilitating the optimal relief, reaching through the best channels and actors, without delay and waste, to those in greatest need.’<sup>63</sup> Kelly Clements, UN Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees, has referred to humanitarian diplomacy as requiring advocacy and engagement with state and non-state actors in gaining access for protection and assistance of refugees.<sup>64</sup>

A number of state actors have begun to integrate humanitarian diplomacy within their foreign and security policy frameworks.<sup>65</sup> Among others, traditional humanitarian actors such as Germany, France and Norway include direct references to humanitarian diplomacy in their humanitarian strategies.

58 IFRC n.d., 2.

59 O’Hagan 2016, 659.

60 Clements 2020, 137.

61 See senior WFP official, as quoted in Minear 2007, 27-28.

62 Egeland 2013, 353.

63 Egeland 2013, 355.

64 Foreign Service Journal, AFSA 2016.

65 O’Hagan 2016. Also, in a systematic review in his doctoral dissertation, Clark 2018 found that the earliest reference to humanitarian diplomacy by a state actor that is available in English is by Oscar S. Straus et al. 1912.

Germany defines the term along the lines of the IFRC's definition and sees it as 'vital for maintaining a humanitarian protection space'.<sup>66</sup> France emphasises humanitarian diplomacy as a method to promote and strengthen compliance with international humanitarian law.<sup>67</sup> Norway sees that, through active engagement in humanitarian diplomacy, a humanitarian normative framework can be complied with and further developed, and thus the overall framework for humanitarian efforts is strengthened and the depoliticisation of humanitarian efforts is supported.<sup>68</sup>

Humanitarian diplomacy is also a useful concept for analysing 'new'/'non-traditional' humanitarian donors from the Western perspective such as Turkey, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). For Turkey, also claimed as the state that is the 'most prominent in invoking humanitarian diplomacy',<sup>69</sup> former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu crafted three dimensions for the country's humanitarian diplomacy.<sup>70</sup> These, in order, were Turkish citizens, Turkey's human-oriented attitude in crisis zones and an inclusive humanitarian perspective at the global level, most importantly in the UN system.<sup>71</sup> Meliha Benli Altunisik connects Turkey's humanitarian diplomacy particularly with the ruling Justice and Development Party.<sup>72</sup> Sultan Barakat explains that Qatar, like many other non-traditional donors, has not formalised humanitarian diplomacy in its foreign policy.<sup>73</sup> Yet the state employs diplomatic tools in its humanitarian interventions at the levels of implementing partners, the Qatari state and global humanitarian diplomacy. Therefore, humanitarian diplomacy is 'a powerful concept for understanding Qatar's multi-faceted and sophisticated conflict and humanitarian response'.<sup>74</sup> The UAE has stated humanitarian diplomacy as one of the six main pillars in its public diplomacy, although without giving much further information on what this means.<sup>75</sup> Deniz Gökalp sees that the UAE uses humanitarian diplomacy to gain regional leverage and international recognition, and finds it as a way to balance the country's foreign policy's militaristic orientation.<sup>76</sup>

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- 66 Germany, Federal Foreign Office 2019, 28  
67 France, Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs n.d., 8.  
68 Norway, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018, 18, 26-27.  
69 O'Hagan 2016, 660.  
70 Davutoğlu 2013.  
71 Davutoğlu 2013, 867-868.  
72 Altunisik 2019.  
73 Barakat 2019.  
74 Barakat 2019, 1.  
75 United Arab Emirates 2017.  
76 Gökalp 2020.

### 3 Humanitarian Diplomatic Practices

As the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator and UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs I saw how unhindered humanitarian action, or lack of such, is measured in human lives. I witnessed the strengths and weakness of contemporary international diplomacy, international politics, and compassion on our watch. It was my job to *mobilize attention, gather resources, and try to promote positive change* when disasters and conflicts occurred. Coordinating humanitarian action within the United Nations, and between the UN and other governmental and non-governmental humanitarian organizations, meant that *I had access to all the actors, good and bad, but could not order anyone to do anything unless they were convinced it was right.*<sup>77</sup>

Humanitarian diplomacy manifests itself in a number of social practices. Efficient delivery of humanitarian aid, gaining support and resources for humanitarian action, and bringing humanitarian issues to the global political agenda and media attention are examples of how humanitarian diplomacy becomes apparent. Similarly, and as noted by Egeland, humanitarian diplomacy may also be ‘measured in human lives’.<sup>78</sup> Key to discovering humanitarian diplomatic practices is to discuss what practices are. Simply put, practices are something actors *do*. They are sustained patterns of human activity that are understood in relation to their specific context. As occurring and repeated within a context, they simultaneously substantiate, define and frame that context.

This section covers only a portion of what could be discussed as humanitarian diplomatic practices. The examples are limited in size but they are illustrative of the existence of humanitarian diplomacy as its own diplomatic category. Whereas practice theory is an insightful tool in reifying humanitarian diplomacy, this article does not state this as an all-inclusive approach, as the pitfalls in applying practice theory are also relevant in humanitarian diplomacy. Prior its application, this article raises five central considerations. First, testing practice theory faces challenges of relational ontology. For example, Vincent Pouliot discusses the representational bias that stems from the inherently different perspectives of practitioners and researchers, as the latter are unavoidably distant observers in the world of international security.<sup>79</sup> Second,

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77 Egeland 2013, 353 (emphasis added).

78 Egeland 2013, 353.

79 Pouliot 2010.

and similarly, what makes discovering humanitarian diplomatic practices peculiar is that there is no single, overarching humanitarianism; rather, humanitarianism is best understood as manifold.<sup>80</sup> A categorisation of 'humanitarian practitioners' covers a wide spectrum of actors, where communities of practice are both homogenous and heterogeneous<sup>81</sup> and, among their disparities, the purpose of a common humanitarian enterprise raises essential divides.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, humanitarian diplomacy involves the carrying out of activities by humanitarian practitioners and institutions that include both official and non-official actors.<sup>83</sup> Third, researchers have little access to the arenas of diplomatic practices to identify the practices, although some exceptions apply.<sup>84</sup> One challenge for research in humanitarian diplomacy is that humanitarian negotiations, in which people's lives can be at stake, can be endangered by the inclusion of 'outsiders' such as researchers. Fourth, a hazard in applying practice theory to humanitarian diplomacy arises from the fact that humanitarian diplomacy can be improvised and heavily context dependent.<sup>85</sup> Accordingly, discovering patterned and repeated practices in the realm of humanitarianism that is, to a certain degree, characterised by change, impromptu negotiations, emergencies, urgency and different sets of actors, can be at times a perplexing task. Fifth and finally, when conducting empirical research in the realm of humanitarianism, as well as humanitarian diplomatic practices, academic interventions should be carefully considered in terms of ethics.

In overcoming some of these hurdles, practice theory suggests that the world is made in practice and that practitioners themselves are best positioned to identify practices.<sup>86</sup> Therefore, proximity to practices and practitioners is at the core of methodological choices such as favouring empirical work along the lines of in-depth interviews and, where appropriate, participant observation and ethnography.<sup>87</sup> One possibility of mitigating some of the pitfalls mentioned above is to conduct a large number of interviews, preferably anonymous, to identify whether similar practices emerge in different respondents' answers. Triangulation of practices, such as participant observation, policy analyses and focus group interviews, offers a feasible option for humanitarian diplomacy. Some actors provide publicly available reports and statements with

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80 Barnett and Weiss 2011, 105.

81 Barnett 2018, 317, 340-341.

82 Barnett and Weiss 2011, 105.

83 Slim 2019, 72; Régnier 2011, 1222.

84 See, for example, Halme-Tuomisaari 2018.

85 Régnier 2011, 1217.

86 Adler and Pouliot 2011, 6.

87 Bueger and Gadinger 2018.

data on issues such as actor positioning, which can also provide context and rationale for humanitarian diplomatic practices. Since ongoing or recent humanitarian negotiations can be particularly sensitive topics for data collection, posing hypothetical questions to respondents can offer an alternative solution in finding what practices may take place in similar situations.

This article benefits from practice ontology by Adler and Pouliot,<sup>88</sup> who draw on a body of practice literature to identify five conceptual elements of an international practice. Humanitarian diplomatic practices can be portrayed in their framework of international practices as understood in the international system of states. In a sense, humanitarianism goes beyond the categorisation of international, as its principles override the idea of categories such as nations, states and borders. In a traditional sense, humanitarianism argues for common humanity, a claim for ubiquitous existence of human worth that is not bordered nor bothered by the Westphalian state system. What makes humanitarian diplomacy, alternatively, predominantly international is the embodiment of its actors in relation to the international state system. Humanitarian actors include state actors and non-state actors. Non-state actors are constitutively defined by their relation to states: for example, *non*-state armed groups do not represent a state, nor do *non*-governmental organisations. *Intergovernmental* organisations imply relations between states, and *individuals* often gain credibility only through recognition by an already recognised stakeholder.

Drawing from this understanding, Fig. 1, which gives a cross-cutting overview of what constitutes humanitarian diplomatic practices, is presented. Following this, Adler and Pouliot's five conceptual elements of practices are each discussed in the given context.<sup>89</sup>

### 3.1 *'Why': Practices Are Embodied Performances that Express Preferences or Beliefs while Representing an Institution or Discourse*

Humanitarian diplomatic practices are driven by humanitarian understandings of the world, and these understandings are communicated through humanitarian discourse. Humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law provide a common framework of reference to which humanitarian diplomats often turn for ideological and practical guidance, signalling their significance to humanitarian diplomatic practices. Humanitarianism, in its traditional sense, is characterised by principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and

88 Adler and Pouliot 2011.

89 The five characteristics of humanitarian diplomatic practices are presented and titled by the author, which are discussed in relation to Adler and Pouliot's 2011 five conceptual elements of an international practice in Subsections 3.1-3.5.



Source: Author's figure.

FIGURE 1 Five characteristics of humanitarian diplomatic practices

independence. These principles are fundamental narratives of humanitarian discourse. Beliefs and preferences, such as the need to assist and protect civilians in conflict, the concept of ‘leave no one behind’ and fundamental claims for human rights in all circumstances, arise from the humanitarian principles and influence humanitarian diplomacy. Embodied performances of humanitarian diplomatic practices are, for example, negotiation for humanitarian access, receiving and employing allocated funds for humanitarian action and engaging in relationship-building between relevant stakeholders that could be benefitted from during an upsurge of humanitarian crisis.

To provide an example, let us revisit the IFRC’s commonly used definition of *humanitarian diplomacy*: ‘persuading decision makers and opinion leaders to act, at all times, in the interests of vulnerable people, and with full respect for fundamental humanitarian principles’.<sup>90</sup> A linkage between embodied performance, belief and discourse is clear: the act of ‘persuasion’ is an embodied performance occurring in the humanitarian diplomatic context, ‘the interest

90 IFRC n.d., 2.

of vulnerable people' is a humanitarian belief and the 'fundamental humanitarian principles' represent humanitarian discourse.<sup>91</sup> As mentioned earlier, in contrast to traditional forms of diplomacy — in which state diplomacy often pursues the advancement of several national agendas simultaneously — humanitarian diplomacy advances humanitarian interests,<sup>92</sup> which mirrors its practices.

Although a distinctive characteristic, representing humanitarian discourse at an empirical level is a complex task. This article uses as an example a case by Antonio Donini who discusses the context of the United Nations' humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan at the turn of the millennium.<sup>93</sup> Whereas the principles of humanitarianism and international humanitarian law were commonly known among the UN staff members, their interpretation and understanding varied from one individual to another, possibly representing various humanitarian beliefs. Then, the Taliban, the de facto ruler of the country in the given context, was perceived as an armed group — belligerents — with which the UN humanitarian agencies did not, in principle, negotiate. In cases where negotiations were conducted with the Taliban, the gap between ideological principles, cultural interpretations and contextual understanding between the two was extreme enough that the mode of communication became to talk 'at each other rather than to each other'.<sup>94</sup> These notions indicate a hazard in representing humanitarianism: becoming a performance without an audience.

### 3.2 *'What': Practices Are Socially Recognised as Competent through Standards and Meaning, and Practices Can Be Done Correctly or Incorrectly*

Humanitarian diplomacy covers and is often recognised as humanitarian action. As interpreted through humanitarian action, humanitarian diplomatic practices gain competency. Socially recognised humanitarian diplomatic practices can be broadly understood as diplomatic practices that claim to support humanitarian objectives and the implementation of humanitarian principles in natural or human-made emergencies, or avoidance of such. Interestingly, it can be argued that humanitarian diplomacy has failed by the time that humanitarian intervention takes place.<sup>95</sup> This article's approach to humanitarian diplomacy is broader: it includes but is not restricted to pre-emptive

91 Quotations in text are from IFRC n.d., 2.

92 Minear 2007.

93 Donini 2007.

94 Donini 2007, 164 (emphasis in original).

95 Smith 2007, 51.



practices. Humanitarian diplomacy plays a role in both ‘risk prevention and crisis management’.<sup>96</sup> Ideally, several practices of humanitarian diplomacy will have taken place *before* humanitarian needs emerge but humanitarian diplomacy is also needed at the time of an emergency. Creating pre-emptive, common ground for humanitarianism is increasingly salient because humanitarian actors today are operating in a landscape in which humanitarian principles are interpreted in differing ways and the palette of humanitarian actors is more colourful than ever before. To navigate this landscape, Hazel Smith and Larry Minear have identified practices that correlate positively with competent humanitarian diplomacy.<sup>97</sup> These include:

the cohesiveness of the humanitarian sector, the presence of seasoned and creative practitioners, the utilization of institutional experience and memory, in-depth knowledge of the political environment and cultural context, the creation of trust, the careful demarcation of what is negotiable, and access to a durable reservoir of political and public support.<sup>98</sup>

In line with these, humanitarian diplomatic practices — such as collaboration between different humanitarian actors; hiring, keeping and tapping into the potential of experienced staff; and relationship-building in public and political partnerships that nourish dialogue and trust — are examples of competent social practices in the humanitarian context.

International attention to correct and, particularly, incorrect practices in the realm of humanitarian diplomacy is increasing. This is evident in the number of established inspection and lessons learnt units, the scope and magnitude of programmatic and impact evaluations, and the spectrum of other monitoring, reporting and accountability measures employed in humanitarianism today. In the realm of the ‘management of failure’,<sup>99</sup> consider Séverine Autesserre’s criticism of the UN peacekeeping mission in Congo; ongoing and unresolved humanitarian disasters in places such as Yemen, Syria and South Sudan; and failures in implementing the Responsibility to Protect along with continued veto acts by members of the UN Security Council.<sup>100</sup> A number of humanitarian diplomatic practices can be also assessed on a smaller scale such as negotiating visas, access and ceasefires between belligerents.<sup>101</sup>

96 Régnier 2011, 1212–1213.

97 Smith and Minear 2007a.

98 Minear 2007, 29.

99 Mascarenhas 2017, 116.

100 Autesserre 2010.

101 Pease 2016, 15.

Social recognition and competency do not necessarily go hand in hand in humanitarianism. One illustrative example of this is military humanitarianism. Militarised aid and a military ethos have come to overlap with humanitarian goals.<sup>102</sup> Militaries are often present in areas where humanitarian emergencies take place and more often than not they have the logistical capacity to deliver humanitarian aid. The collaboration between militaries and humanitarians can be seen as problematic since humanitarianism traditionally stands for neutrality and both private and national militaries represent a biased security interest. Even if soldiers do not claim to neglect the idea of shared humanity, their realm of violent practices questions it.<sup>103</sup> An empirical example of political military humanitarianism can be provided from Venezuela. Paula Vásquez Lezama discusses the context of a natural disaster, the landslides of ‘la Tragedia’ in 1999, which occurred simultaneously with the vote of approval for a new constitution. Armed forces intervened during the emergency in provision of aid, providing food to the affected populations, thereby ‘securing’ (repressive action to stabilise the situation in) the disaster zone, and transforming military bases into humanitarian accommodation. As a result of these processes of central involvement, the military secured a cardinal societal position within Venezuelan politics<sup>104</sup> — another end goal that many humanitarians do not strive towards.

### 3.3 *‘Who’: Practices Embody, Enact and Reify Background Knowledge and Are Intersubjective in Nature*

As discussed in Subsection 3.1, humanitarian background knowledge builds on humanitarian understandings of the world. These diverse understandings create an intersubjective reality in which humanitarian diplomatic practices are based on social interaction. They require both intragroup and intergroup engagement as well as multiple levels of stakeholdership. Compared with traditional state diplomacy, a distinctive feature of humanitarian diplomacy is that it strives to engage with all relevant stakeholders in a humanitarian emergency, including non-state armed groups.<sup>105</sup> Humanitarian diplomatic practices occur in a transnational context, involving affected populations, deployed personnel, donors, governments and others.<sup>106</sup> Humanitarian diplomacy is about implicitly acknowledging that humanitarian work expands beyond the mere

102 De Lauri 2019.

103 Fassin 2007, 519.

104 Vásquez Lezama 2010, 135-149.

105 Egeland 2013, 354; Slim 2019, 73.

106 Pierre Minn, as in Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado and Henig 2016, 10-11.

'humanitarian' operational scene and that humanitarian diplomatic practices include and expand beyond humanitarian negotiation.<sup>107</sup>

At the core of the embodiment, enactment and reification is the actor – the humanitarian diplomat. But who is a humanitarian diplomat? Card-carrying humanitarian officials do not often self-identify as humanitarian diplomats.<sup>108</sup> This can be partly explained by the claimed apolitical nature of humanitarianism, whereas diplomacy is traditionally associated with state diplomacy, with political and national interests at stake. It could be debated, though, whether self-identification plays a role. The significance of self-identification may not offer much value, as it may not affect other stakeholders' opinions of the official's representativeness. This is exemplified by the fact that, at times, humanitarian officials are forced to engage with diplomacy in an old-fashioned sense when host governments or powerful non-governmental actors in humanitarian settings compel humanitarians to practise diplomacy to reach operational ends.<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, also so-called 'humanitarian beneficiaries' recognise who to negotiate with, as the case of the Kakuma refugee camps exemplifies: the interfaces between aid-providing agencies and refugees, including refugees' adopted rights-based language, significantly determine access to services and aid.<sup>110</sup>

If adapting a Butlerian sense of embodiment,<sup>111</sup> the humanitarian diplomat *becomes* through the practice of humanitarian diplomacy. Therefore, it could be argued that anyone who practises humanitarian diplomacy in socially organised contexts is, *de facto*, a humanitarian diplomat. This approach is contested not only by some practitioners but also by scholars who see a diplomat as a state-confined agent in humanitarian settings.<sup>112</sup> In balancing this criticism, it is useful to look at how practice theory draws attention to analysing the physical environment and surroundings of practices in which agency is created. These include social topographies that distribute knowledge, power and recognition<sup>113</sup> such as professional position in an institution. For example, this would mean that to be a humanitarian diplomat is to be recognised as an employee of an international humanitarian organisation such as the UN, IFRC or Médecins Sans Frontières.

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107 Minear 2007, 24.

108 Minear 2007, 8; Clements 2020, 137-140.

109 Smith 2007, 40; Clements 2020.

110 Hilhorst and Jansen 2010, 1127.

111 Butler 1990.

112 Sending 2015.

113 McCourt 2016, 481.

### 3.4 *'Where': Practices Are Patterned with Iteration in Socially Organised Contexts*

Humanitarian diplomacy requires interdependency to be successful. Therefore, humanitarian diplomatic practices take place in socially organised contexts, a fluid concept in relation to humanitarianism. These can be, for example, humanitarian platforms and institutional frameworks such as the World Humanitarian Summit and World Humanitarian Forum. Alternatively, a humanitarian emergency itself also constitutes such context. The very term *emergency* locates a situation in a specific place,<sup>114</sup> which directs the engagement of relevant stakeholders such as national governments, regional bodies and possible belligerents. Despite the changing contexts of humanitarian emergencies, it is often the case that the practices that are carried out are patterned and similar. For example, regardless of the specific context, humanitarian organisations aim to create a humanitarian space separate from political and military authorities by negotiating a presence in a given country where humanitarian needs occur, and strive to assist and monitor aid provision for vulnerable populations.<sup>115</sup>

Although humanitarian situations continue to be characterised by unpredictability and urgency, and humanitarian negotiations continue therefore to be impromptu, the preparedness to face these challenges continues to evolve. Herein, iteration is an integrated function because of the importance of establishing and maintaining necessary stakeholder relationships,<sup>116</sup> relevant to diplomatic accounts, including humanitarian diplomacy. Repetition can improve efficiency of delivery in meeting urgent needs, which augments the credibility and future collaboration prospects of the humanitarian actor in question. Similarly, a distinctive feature of humanitarian diplomacy is the professionalisation of the humanitarian field with systematic learning and training. For example, IFRC, in partnership with DiploFoundation, offers an online course in humanitarian diplomacy that is directed towards practitioner audiences.<sup>117</sup> The evolution from previous humanitarian amateur volunteers has transformed into present-day humanitarian professionals with relevant training and educational backgrounds.<sup>118</sup> Guidelines, manuals, handbooks and workshops are being produced to support practitioners in their practices.<sup>119</sup> The

114 Paulmann 2013, 216.

115 Smith and Minear 2007b, 1.

116 See, for example, Pouliot 2010.

117 IFRC 2020.

118 Walker et al. 2010; Barnett and Weiss 2011; Mascarenhas 2017, 66-89.

119 Pease 2016, 156-157. For empirical examples, see Mancini-Griffoli and Picot 2004; McHugh and Bessler 2006.

body of knowledge signalling appropriate institutional humanitarian diplomatic practices continues to expand and provide frameworks for practitioners.

### 3.5 *'How': Practices Have Two Simultaneous Dimensions: Material and Discursive*

Humanitarian diplomatic practices have both material and discursive dimensions through two semantic fields, humanitarianism and diplomacy. Diplomacy has discursive aspects such as negotiation and compromise, and is an essential avenue to express amity and enmity. It takes material form in the diplomats themselves, as well as in meeting rooms and conference halls, minutes of meetings, letters, resolutions, PowerPoint presentations and handshakes. Humanitarian discourse, on the other hand, includes, for example, the promotion of humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law. It takes material form in personnel; humanitarian aid materials such as nutrition packages, water tanks, medical equipment, and humanitarian organisations' office spaces and warehouses; and cars and clothing with humanitarian logos.

As an empirical example of these two semantic fields combined, Jan Egeland discusses his experience as UN Emergency Relief Coordinator in 2004 when several countries were struck by the Indian Ocean tsunami.<sup>120</sup> While he does not analytically identify material and discursive elements of humanitarian diplomatic practices, these can be analysed through his depiction of the event. Humanitarian diplomatic practices in this case included active offers of the UN's expertise and support, briefings with diplomats and affected countries, and advocacy for a coherent international response in coordination with local and national governments. In discussing these practices, Egeland makes reference to people, such as colleagues, duty officers, standby personnel, relief coordinators and the UN resident and humanitarian coordinators, who all embody actors in a material sense and produce discursivity intersubjectively in the given humanitarian context. This discursive production is captured through the creation of situation reports, press enquiries, press statements and press conferences, and in phone calls, daily meetings, conferences, video conferences and live call-in phone shows, to name a few, all exemplifying material elements.

When humanitarian diplomacy is understood through its practices with discursive and material dimensions, not only do practices produce relevance in a given context, they also stipulate the reality of humanitarian diplomacy in the future. Therefore, the relationship between discursive and material dimensions of humanitarian diplomacy incentivises a broader analysis beyond

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<sup>120</sup> Egeland 2013, 355-359.

the scope of this article. How does the material space, such as physical access to vulnerable populations, define opportunities and constraints for humanitarian diplomacy? Who is physically represented in the platforms where humanitarian diplomacy takes place? Is humanitarian diplomacy confined by the abstract, actor-dependent interpretation, with implications such as lack of sufficient funding? Or alternatively, is the unoccupied nature of its definition rather a discursive and materialistic opportunity?

#### 4 Conclusion

Perceiving humanitarian diplomacy through its practices offers increased understanding of what constitutes humanitarian diplomacy. Based on the level of practices, this article suggests that humanitarian diplomacy is an instrument for humanitarian actors to create humanitarian space, to harvest resources needed for humanitarian action, to mediate between humanitarian principles and ideals and pragmatic realities on the ground and to build necessary partnerships for humanitarian intervention. Humanitarian diplomacy surrounds the seemingly ever-increasing field of humanitarian action, and engages with actors such as non-state armed groups, which many other forms of diplomacy more commonly neglect. It can be understood as its own form of diplomatic engagement through its focus on humanitarian issues, and in that traditional state-centric diplomacy, even when directed towards humanitarian issues, does not achieve the scope or cater for non-national humanitarian interests to the extent that these two could be understood as the same.

This article suggests that humanitarian diplomatic practices can be understood through five basic characteristics: 'why' humanitarian diplomatic practices take place, 'what' they mean, 'who' they include, 'where' they occur and 'how' they are done. Humanitarian diplomacy is recognised as humanitarian action, which is often, but not always, driven by humanitarian principles and international humanitarian law. It includes a variety of stakeholders determined by the context within which humanitarian interests are at stake, and it has discursive and material elements combining the semantic fields of humanitarianism and diplomacy. These five characteristics should be understood, like humanitarian diplomacy itself, as occurring on several international and national levels of power.<sup>121</sup> Humanitarian diplomatic practices take place at various levels, as high-level engagement and as a part of humanitarian practitioners' daily business. In studies of diplomacy, these distinctions are

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121 Slim 2019, 72-73; Régnier 2011, 1219-1223.

referred to, for example, as ‘high’ and ‘low’ diplomatic cultures,<sup>122</sup> and capital *D* and small *d* diplomacy.<sup>123</sup>

By exploring the under-researched topic of humanitarian diplomacy, this article both contributes to scholarly work on the different forms and terminology of diplomacy and is relevant to practitioners in tackling some of the ambiguity that characterises the current modus operandi of humanitarian diplomacy. In defining humanitarian diplomatic practices, this article argues that practice theory has the potential to provide valuable insights into humanitarian diplomacy. But as with any theoretical approach, it has its limitations. For further analysis, practices need to be explored in lived experiences and not solely based on textual analysis,<sup>124</sup> and this article offers a tailored analytical framework for such a study of humanitarian diplomacy. Text-based reviews bear limited fruit, particularly in relation to humanitarian diplomacy, as the concept is, at its current stage, under-researched and practitioner driven. Here, this article provides a point of departure: the author concurs that the power of everyday logics — practices — cannot be undermined in relation to humanitarian diplomacy as, in the absence of a world government, these practices can explain how humanitarian principles manifest in the world.<sup>125</sup>

This article claims that there is an increasing need for academics to understand humanitarian diplomacy and for practitioners to employ it in a cognisant manner. Not only are humanitarian disasters expanding in complexity and volume — both natural and human-made — but humanitarianism has also been transformed by contemporary conflicts. A recalculation of the correlation between humanitarian disasters and foreign and security interests shows that contemporary humanitarianism intersects with foreign policies and militarism.<sup>126</sup> When conflicts, disasters and epidemics are intertwined with politically incentivised and influenced international interventions, humanitarianism itself can be seen as a way of governing international relations, territories and lives.<sup>127</sup> Here, once more, humanitarian diplomacy mediates between the apolitical and political, between ideals and pragmatism.

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122 Constantinou 2016, 5–11.

123 Minear 2007, 11–12.

124 Neumann 2002, 651.

125 Pease 2016, 180.

126 Barnett 2009; Ticktin 2014.

127 Mills 2005; De Lauri 2016, 1.

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*Salla Turunen*

is a Doctoral Researcher at the Chr. Michelsen Institute and the Department of Comparative Politics at the University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway. Having a background as a practitioner with the UN, her research investigates the articulation of humanitarian diplomacy and negotiations in complex emergencies with the aim of informing both academic debates and humanitarian professionals themselves. Her current work is a part of the research project 'Humanitarian Diplomacy: Assessing Policies, Practices and Impact of New Forms of Humanitarian Action and Foreign Policy', funded by the Research Council of Norway. Herein, her research builds on an ongoing interdisciplinary and intersectoral dialogue nourished by an international consortium of academic partners and several humanitarian actors and international networks.