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# Humanitarian Diplomacy: Interview with Jan Egeland

BY Salla Turunen | Photography The Norwegian Refugee Council/NRC

Humanitarian diplomacy surrounds the field of humanitarian action and aims to meet humanitarian objectives by diplomatic means. The term itself is most often used by humanitarian practitioners, and as a practitioner-driven discussion, CMI's Doctoral Researcher Salla Turunen conducts research interviews with humanitarian practitioners in exploring humanitarian diplomacy and its practices. By contrast with anonymous interviews, this edited research interview has been published with the permission of the interviewee, Jan Egeland.

Jan Egeland served as the United Nation's Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator from 2003 to 2006 during Kofi Annan's time as UN Secretary-General. In that role he contributed to reforming the global humanitarian response system and organized the international response to, among others, the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004.

Currently, Egeland is Secretary-General of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), serving in this role since August 2013. As the head of this large INGO, he oversees the work of the humanitarian organization in 30 countries affected by conflict and disaster.

In addition to these roles, he has served as Special Adviser to the UN Special Envoy for Syria appointed by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon; the European Director at Human Rights Watch; Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General for Conflict Prevention and Resolution; the Director of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs; the UN Secretary General's Special Adviser on Colombia; State Secretary of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Secretary-General of the Norwegian Red Cross; and he has held leading positions at Amnesty International. In 2006, Time magazine named Egeland one of the "100 people who shape our world."

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**Salla Turunen:** What does humanitarian diplomacy mean to you?

**Jan Egeland:** Humanitarian diplomacy to me means decision-makers – people with power – exerting change to allow a humanitarian operation for humanitarian objectives to happen. In my view, humanitarian diplomacy is not the general dissemination of information, it is seeking a specific objective. The objective must be in line with humanitarian principles and seek to fulfill humanitarian needs and objectives on behalf of people in need.

**Salla Turunen:** How do you consider that humanitarian diplomacy differs from other forms of diplomacy?

**Jan Egeland:** Simply because it's narrower. Most national diplomacies foster the interests of states and governments. Humanitarian diplomacy is done on behalf of people in humanitarian need, either specific groups or general groups, and it seeks specific objectives. Of course, humanitarian diplomacy can also seek to ratify a convention, which would then lead to improved humanitarian action. Humanitarian diplomacy has to be linked to humanitarian action, meaning that it has to further pave the way for humanitarian action.

**Salla Turunen:** You made a reference to high-level diplomacy. Would you say that humanitarian diplomacy differs at different levels, at headquarter and field levels, for instance?

**Jan Egeland:** Yes and no. It follows objectives. At the field level, it is very specific to field conditions: Getting to a village and negotiating with two or more armed groups in order to do so. It's very specific humanitarian diplomacy. In such cases humanitarian diplomacy is closely tied to mediation and negotiation. At headquarter level it's more general: Trying to influence the UN Security Council or conflicting parties in general to allow something – lift sanctions or the embargo on Yemen. This said, of course there are sometimes blurred lines between general international politics and humanitarian diplomacy. Actors can hide their general international diplomacy and political objectives and disguise them as humanitarian diplomacy.

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**We've seen in Syria that the Russians as much as the Americans or the Europeans or the Gulf Countries or Iran all say that "our interest is in helping the civilian population and that is why we are seeking these objectives," and yet you will find that they are in opposition because there are different sides in this war.**

**Salla Turunen:** At the high level, you mentioned that humanitarian diplomacy overlaps with general tendencies of state and multilateral diplomacies and so forth, and at the field level you said that there is a certain overlap with humanitarian negotiations. Specifically, how do you see the relationship between humanitarian diplomacy and humanitarian negotiations?

**Jan Egeland:** This becomes pretty academic, but, of course, humanitarian negotiations can be seen as a subcategory of humanitarian diplomacy. If we see humanitarian diplomacy as all interactions with actors and parties that can influence a specific situation, humanitarian negotiations could be seen as the act of seeking specific objectives with specific parties. And mediation would, of course, be seeking various parties, two or more, to agree on something. You could say that humanitarian diplomacy is the wide umbrella, and humanitarian negotiation is a narrowing down to interactions with specific parties and actors, and mediation is a further subcategory involving a third party to seek an agreement around specific objectives.

**Salla Turunen:** Humanitarian diplomacy can be understood as an oxymoron, wherein ‘humanitarian’ stands for humanitarian principles such as neutrality, independence and impartiality, and ‘diplomacy’ stands for negotiation, compromise and pragmatism. Do you see any inherent tension built into the term?

**Jan Egeland:** Diplomacy is a part of international relations and politics, and humanitarian diplomacy has specific objectives that should be guided by humanitarian principles. There wouldn’t be any tension if people could agree on that. I was a Deputy Foreign Minister for seven years, [and based on that experience I can say that] all states act according to interests and ideals. Some states, such as Trump’s America, have been much more on the interests side and have left ideals to the previous administration, but they have also sought objectives. Humanitarian diplomacy is closely connected to the ideals side of diplomacy, concerned with, for example, how UN member states act.

We also say that we ‘do’ humanitarian diplomacy: My organization, the NRC, has a million humanitarian diplomatic outreaches per year. Today we do those in 30 countries. We reach out to parties to conflict, actors, governments, etc., and we call that humanitarian diplomacy. Strictly speaking, perhaps you could say it’s a way for diplomats to represent member states that do diplomacy, and maybe you could say that the ICRC does it also. We use it colloquially to cover all our lobbying as humanitarians with objectives targeting real people in the field.

**Salla Turunen:** One of the distinctive features of humanitarian diplomacy is in its inclusion of all stakeholders involved, whether official or non-official. Non-state armed groups represent one of these stakeholders. In your view, how does humanitarian diplomacy work in dealing with such actors?

**Jan Egeland:** Absolutely the same way as with state actors. We deal with non-state actors as parties to conflict. As such, we need to speak to and influence them. I could speak for ten hours on the whole issue of counter-terrorism, sanctions and our need to have interactions with the listed organizations, because they are parties to conflicts and we need to serve civilians in the areas under their control.

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**For us, it makes no difference whether they are non-state or state actors, or even whether or not they are listed as terrorist and illegitimate.**

For us it's the same under international law.

**Salla Turunen:** You have previously served as the UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and the Emergency Relief Coordinator from 2003 to 2006. By comparison with, do you see any changes in humanitarian diplomacy in the last two decades?

**Jan Egeland:** Not so much in the objectives or how it's being done. The main change is that there is a lot more of humanitarian diplomacy today compared with that stage, as we've grown. Take my own organization: At the time when I was the Emergency Relief Coordinator, the chief humanitarian diplomat, if you like, we at NRC would have had, I don't know, 1,500 humanitarian workers and now we have 15,000, so we are ten times bigger. Similarly, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is much bigger and it has a lot more representation in the field.

The growth has been more in quantity than in quality, and that is part of the problem. There has been less progress in protection than in assistance, as we are doing much better in humanitarian assistance. Mortality has dropped dramatically, education is better, as is providing shelter, water and sanitation, nutrition and calorie intake and disease control. But people are still, you know, abused beyond belief and parties to conflict are still bombing hospitals and refugee camps and what not.

**Salla Turunen:** Some humanitarian actors, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), have provided a clear definition of their humanitarian diplomacy and its scope and aims. The UN has not done that, although the World Food Programme (WFP) does have a unit on humanitarian diplomacy. Why do you think a UN definition of humanitarian diplomacy is lacking, or even a lack of relevant discussion?

**Jan Egeland:** I don't know... Of course, the ICRC was born out of the desire to seek acceptance of humanitarian norms on the battlefield. So from the outset it was an initiative exercising humanitarian diplomacy, humanitarian negotiation and humanitarian mediation. But I would say that despite the lack of definition it has been big for the UN. Look at the original resolutions for negotiating with member states within the humanitarian system and for coordinating joint objectives. That's the whole point. You could even argue that coordination with a lot of different actors is humanitarian diplomacy, getting all of us to seek a common goal.

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## Humanitarian diplomacy is private and public, and that is the biggest distinction, basically.

You can speak to the world through the media and then you can influence. But then there are a lot of things that do not belong in the public sphere. You have to be very principled, not one-sided or biased, you must always speak the truth, not on behalf of any group of countries or donors or whatever – you have to speak on behalf of the people in humanitarian need. So private diplomacy is often more effective. Some armed groups don't care if they look bad on CNN or Al Jazeera, and some governments do and some groups do not. So you have to reach them by direct negotiations or, more often, indirectly. Who can exert influence? Again, the primary question for a humanitarian diplomat is to discover who can influence the people whose ways need to change at the moment. Is it

religious leaders, the elders in the community, the neighbors who house them or at least tolerate their existence – who is it? And what combination of private and public diplomacy are you going to do?

Of course, one lever is public exposure: so what you tell them to change privately, and if they don't do it, you could say it publicly. The Emergency Relief Coordinator can say things that the Humanitarian Coordinator cannot say. The Humanitarian Coordinator can say things that the village area responsible for foreign aid group cannot say. The head of an agency can do much more.

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**The WFP can now use its Nobel Peace Prize to call a spade a spade more frequently in relation to what parties in conflict are doing and what is wrong, because they have more leverage.**

So those are the kind of things that are the most important. People often think about the need for neutrality and not criticizing anybody. This has to be a judgment call and some of it should become instinctive. If you think you don't have that instinct, you shouldn't work as a humanitarian. You could become a political diplomat or an academic, or whatever, but you have to be a fighter for the people, for civilians, if you are a humanitarian.

**Salla Turunen:** Considering your current role as Secretary-General of the NRC since 2013, how does humanitarian diplomacy of an NGO/INGO differ from that of the UN?

**Jan Egeland:** It depends whether you are a local or an international group. Some of the INGOs are in many ways acting like the UN agencies. There's not a whole lot of difference in how we work, and we do have a lot of influence. We also have a lot of resources to do humanitarian diplomacy – more resources than we sometimes admit. Of course, the Emergency Relief Coordinator and some heads of agencies are in a league of their own: They have much more standing and therefore have much more influence than we do.

**Salla Turunen:** How do you see the role and importance of humanitarian diplomacy in the future?

**Jan Egeland:** I hope we see a real increase, really. It's related to my premise that assistance has made a lot of progress, more progress than many admit. In the next 10 years we need to be much better in protecting civilians, and having mostly men with guns and power behave better: To end impunity, to protect civilians and be close to them, expose what is happening, and to make those responsible accountable. We are not even close to this goal at the moment.