

5 Dos and Don'ts in Humanitarian Diplomacy

Humanitarian diplomacy has gained increasing prominence in recent years. State-led humanitarian diplomacy initiatives are becoming more common, reflecting both the growing recognition of humanitarian diplomacy as a tool to improve respect for international humanitarian law (IHL) and humanitarian principles, and mounting concern over the erosion of international norms and shrinking humanitarian space.

There is no universal definition of humanitarian diplomacy and interpretations and approaches vary significantly across stakeholders, institutions, and states. For this paper, humanitarian diplomacy is defined as the use of diplomatic engagement, negotiation, influence and political leverage in pursuit of humanitarian outcomes, including protection of civilians, facilitation of humanitarian access, support for principled humanitarian action and reinforcement of compliance with IHL. It is considered distinct from humanitarian advocacy, referring to diplomatic and political action by states and other political actors rather than action by humanitarian organisations to influence policy and state action.

When used effectively and carefully, humanitarian diplomacy can be an effective tool for improving humanitarian outcomes in some contexts. However, without sustained and informed engagement, even well-intentioned diplomatic action can risk undermining humanitarian principles and cause unintended harm. This paper outlines five do's and five don'ts to guide states' engagement in humanitarian diplomacy initiatives to support constructive humanitarian outcomes. This paper is based on a longer policy brief 'Humanitarian diplomacy in practice: Lessons learned to strengthen humanitarian outcomes', which was produced by the Norwegian Refugee Council in 2026. Please contact NRC Geneva - nrcgeneva.policy@nrc.no - for more information.

THE DOS

What states should implement to achieve effective humanitarian outcomes

- 1 Do ground humanitarian diplomacy in realities on the ground**
Effective humanitarian diplomacy requires diplomatic engagement to be informed by realities on the ground. Humanitarian organisations, local actors, and local communities hold real-time knowledge of conflict dynamics and access constraints that cannot be gained elsewhere. States should collate such information from diverse organisations through inclusive engagement at country, regional and global levels. Otherwise, critical perspectives can be missed, as exposure to access constraints varies depending on an organisation's mandate, programmes, and legal status, among other factors. Diplomatic engagements and decisions must be grounded on these insights to ensure initiative remain relevant and focus on the issues that are most critical for humanitarian access and civilian protection.

2 Do keep humanitarian objectives separate from political and military agendas

One of the main risks in humanitarian diplomacy is that humanitarian objectives become subordinated to or entangled with broader political, military or strategic agendas. When states make political concessions or agreements based on the provision of aid, humanitarian actors can be perceived as aligned with political or military agendas. This can undermine perceptions of their neutrality and independence, weakening their acceptance. In turn, this may have serious implications for staff safety and security, with the greatest impact often felt by local staff. Most fundamentally, treating humanitarian assistance as negotiable weakens the principle that access to aid and civilian protection are legal obligations under IHL, not political concessions. To mitigate these risks, it is essential to have formal and visible separation between humanitarian, political, military and economic tracks. This prevents humanitarian issues from being traded against political concessions and clearly signals to all parties that humanitarian issues will be treated on their own terms.

3 Do define clear objectives, red lines and accountability mechanisms

Humanitarian diplomacy is most effective when based on clearly defined, realistic and jointly agreed objectives, supported by coordinated use of leverage to incentivise behaviour change. When initiatives have broad or vague mandates and lack a clear plan in relation to use of diplomatic ‘carrots and sticks’, processes often fail to deliver beneficial humanitarian outcomes and can risk providing stakeholders the opportunity to manipulate or politicise negotiations. Providing defined objectives also allows humanitarian organisations to indicate red lines at the onset of an initiative, including identifying when it should be paused, recalibrated or withdrawn to avoid doing harm. Initiatives must also include mechanisms to monitor compliance and hold parties to account beyond initial agreements. The period immediately after an agreement is reached or commitments are made is critical for establishing implementation and compliance and should mark a transition to sustained engagement with parties focused on implementation and accountability.

4 Do dedicate and sustain adequate resources to humanitarian diplomacy initiatives and work across government departments

Humanitarian diplomacy is only effective where there is political will to utilise diplomatic leverage and take concrete action. As such, initiatives are only as effective as the resources, personnel and commitment behind them. Resources should be sustained and include dedicated, trained staff with humanitarian and diplomatic expertise as well as authority to make decisions and act. When possible, investments should be made in dedicated humanitarian diplomacy functions, whether through special envoys or seconded humanitarian expertise. Initiatives also require secretariat capacity to collect the evidence base and support the diplomatic process. They should also benefit from the host of tools and resources that a state has available, such as economic influence or intelligence information. Diplomatic engagements must be

coordinated across state departments and functions to ensure outcomes have political backing and result in concrete action.

5

Do work with those who can influence parties to the conflict

Effective humanitarian diplomacy requires engagement with state and non-state parties to conflict, alongside states and other stakeholders that have influence over them. Many of today's most acute humanitarian crises involve parties to conflict, state and non-state alike, who are unwilling or unable to engage with traditional humanitarian actors and donors, but who do maintain relationships with different interlocutors. States that maintain relationships across these political and ideological divides can play an important intermediary role in humanitarian diplomacy engagements. Diplomatic initiatives must identify and engage the interlocutors who can influence the parties whose behaviour most directly affects humanitarian outcomes.

THE DON'TS

What states should avoid to prevent unintended harm to humanitarian responses and civilians

1

Don't treat IHL as negotiable

Humanitarian diplomacy initiatives must be rooted in the premise that IHL is not an aspirational framework, but a binding legal baseline that states, parties to the conflict, and third states, are obligated to uphold. Without this basis, humanitarian access can be used as diplomatic leverage to achieve political or military outcomes and undermine existing protections for humanitarian actors and civilians under IHL. States and humanitarian actors should avoid discussions on "humanitarian ceasefires" or "humanitarian truces" as this contributes to the blurred distinction between humanitarian outcomes and military objectives. While often well-intentioned, this terminology frames humanitarian access as dependent on a ceasefire and reinforces the perception that aid delivery requires political or military concessions. However, IHL applies precisely in times of armed conflict and obliges parties to facilitate unimpeded aid delivery throughout and during active hostilities.

2

Don't initiate diplomatic disengagement without considering humanitarian impact

States should refrain from severing diplomatic relations, suspending contacts with de facto authorities or applying no-contact policies toward designated groups without analysing the consequences for humanitarian responses. Diplomatic withdrawal can leave humanitarian actors without political backing in their negotiations, exposing them to greater pressure as their presence, access, and ability to operate become subjects of negotiation. At other times, political disengagement creates a vacuum that other actors aim to fill, with different agendas.

3

Don't prioritise visibility, processes or symbolic gains over sustained humanitarian outcomes

States should resist the temptation to prioritise big ticket, easily communicable results over the structural drivers of humanitarian access and protection

concerns. States should be prepared to invest and sustain diplomatic pressure, beyond high-level visits, announcements, and conferences. Equally states should be willing to engage on smaller, yet operationally impactful issues, even when positive outcomes may be perceived as less politically impressive. Humanitarian diplomacy initiatives must invest not only in developing collective analysis on the challenges, but importantly on identifying the incentives or pressures that could shift the position of parties to a conflict. The metrics for successful humanitarian diplomacy must reflect improvements to the conditions needed for humanitarians to deliver programmes effectively and for civilians to be better protected. This goes beyond counting trucks reaching a civilian population and instead should reflect that humanitarian aid encompasses protection programmes, cash assistance and other services, all of which rely on staff and funds getting to areas where people are in need.

4

Don't initiate parallel and uncoordinated diplomatic processes

A proliferation of parallel diplomatic initiatives can create fragmented approaches to solutions that can weaken the humanitarian outcomes. Where multiple states or coalitions pursue parallel uncoordinated initiatives, conflict parties can exploit differences in negotiating approaches, concessions, and messaging to advance their own interests. This practice is sometimes referred to as “forum shopping”, when parties selectively engage with diverse initiatives without participating meaningfully. It has been recognised as a significant barrier to successful diplomatic outcomes and can place disproportionate demands on humanitarian organisations and other stakeholders who can be asked to contribute analysis to multiple diplomatic tracks simultaneously.

5

Don't skip the “do no harm analysis”

States pursuing humanitarian diplomacy engagements must carefully assess whether their actions could unintentionally harm humanitarian responses or increase protection risks for civilians. Dialogue alone can be insufficient to influence state or armed actors absent some form of political, economic or legal leverage. Punitive measures can be viewed by states as relatively straightforward and immediate mechanisms for influencing parties to a conflict. However, it is critical the potential impact on the political and economic power dynamics between states and conflict parties is carefully assessed to avoid unintended consequences for humanitarian actors on the ground who may be perceived as aligned with these measures. Prior to any diplomatic action, states should carefully consider the potential for engagements to undermine locally negotiated humanitarian access agreements or inadvertently narrow humanitarian space in the long term.

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Please contact NRC Geneva - nrcgeneva.policy@nrc.no - to receive more information about the policy brief.