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Humanitarian Diplomacy:
A Tool to Rebuild Trust in the Humanitarian Sector

S. Nanthini

SYNOPSIS

One of the greatest challenges in delivering humanitarian aid to affected communities remains the denial of or limits to access, a result of decreasing trust as well as increasing politicisation. Humanitarian diplomacy is therefore an ideal tool for humanitarian actors to overcome the endemic trust challenge in the sector. Only by consistently engaging state and non-state stakeholders, strengthening relationships with them, and building enough credibility can humanitarian actors accomplish their raison d'etre – *gaining access and delivering aid to affected communities during times of crisis.*

COMMENTARY

"Trust in the international system is eroding." By now, this refrain has been a constant in international settings. For example, in his 2022 address to the United Nations General Assembly, Secretary-General António Guterres highlighted the current international landscape in which "geopolitical tensions and lack of trust" are "poison[ing] … global cooperation". This lack of trust is particularly evident in the humanitarian sector, where trust is at the heart of any and all successes. This increasing "trust" challenge for the sector has very real implications for humanitarian action, predominantly in regard to access to communities in need and the shrinking of the humanitarian space.

Humanitarian diplomacy, with its emphasis on trust-building, both among internal actors and between them and external parties, can be a potential tool to "build back better". After all, what is humanitarian diplomacy but a way to cultivate trust and build

relationships *ahead* of a crisis to ensure that populations in need can be accessed *during* crises?

The Trust Challenge in the Humanitarian System

In recent years, the subject of trust (or lack of it) in international institutions has become a key focus of policy engagement. This is probably a response to the trust challenge that has emerged as an increasingly significant problem in the past decade. International attention to this worrying trend has been clearly reflected in various fora, including the 2024 World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, with its theme of "Rebuilding Trust", and the ongoing 78th Session of the UN General Assembly, with its theme of "Rebuilding Trust and Reigniting Global Solidarity".

Secretary-General António Guterres at the 78th Session of the UN General Assembly, addressing the theme of "Rebuilding Trust and Reigniting Global Solidarity: Accelerating action on the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals towards peace, prosperity, progress and the sustainability for all", a timely topic in the current trust-scarce landscape. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

The trust challenge is particularly evident in the humanitarian sector, where the trustworthiness of humanitarian actors and organisations has come under suspicion owing to a number of factors. These include rising cynicism about globalisation, particularly in the global North, the increasing politicisation of aid, the unequal nature of the humanitarian system, as well as a series of public scandals involving the behaviours of particular humanitarian staff members, which have tainted the broader sector. This challenge is most clearly reflected in the shrinking of the humanitarian space, with humanitarian actors facing increasingly restricted and politicised access to affected populations just as affected populations face increasingly restricted access to humanitarian aid.

With trust being the essential ingredient of success in humanitarian work, rebuilding it is therefore of the highest priority. Humanitarian diplomacy, with its emphasis on building trust and strengthening relationships, can be a tool to overcome the trust challenge that has become endemic in the humanitarian sector.

Humanitarian Diplomacy to Deliver Humanitarian Solutions

At its core, humanitarian diplomacy is a way to deliver sustainable humanitarian solutions to those in need by "smoothening" the way ahead of time to prevent "system blockages". Such smoothening can take the form of informal activities including policy dialogues, private negotiations, and networking activities – all in an effort to cultivate trust and strengthen relationships. These in turn may lead to sustainable access to affected populations, rather than simply one-off aid drops. It is important, however, to note that, as in most other forms of diplomacy, humanitarian diplomacy too is a long-term process, one in which success is not immediate, or indeed, guaranteed.

While the term "humanitarian diplomacy" is traditionally associated with international actors such as UN agencies, the Red Cross movement, and other major non-governmental organisations such as the Médecins Sans Frontières, states too are playing an increasingly active role in the space.

For example, Myanmar and Thailand recently announced a bilateral humanitarian corridor along their common border. According to this plan, assistance – in the form of food and medical supplies – will be delivered to displaced people in the region and overseen by the Red Cross Society of Thailand and Myanmar as well as the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management.

While imperfect, this deal is still an opportunity for states in the region to reach some affected communities. It is important to note that this deal was most likely brokered – despite internal difficulties faced by the bloc since the 2021 coup in Myanmar – because of the pre-existing relationship of trust between the two countries, as well as with the broader ASEAN region, which has been built over time, a key example of humanitarian diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

Humanitarian Diplomacy in a Trust-Scarce Landscape

In a trust-scarce geopolitical landscape beset with challenges, humanitarian diplomacy is a way to ensure consistent communication between stakeholders, notwithstanding questions of legitimacy and/or recognition. After all, where there is engagement, there is also the opportunity to build trust.

This was clearly demonstrated by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) in Afghanistan, where OCHA's constant engagement and negotiation with the de facto authorities in the country allowed them to gain access to affected communities on the ground. Importantly, attempts to negotiate access were made at all levels – from the national level to the village level – to ensure the greatest chance of success, a strategy that paid off during the Herat earthquakes in 2023.

No doubt, the same flexibility to engage with all stakeholders on the ground may not be granted to all organisations and/or actors – particularly those that are state-based as they may be bound by their own domestic politics or international obligations not to engage with non-state parties or de facto authorities, as was the case in Afghanistan.

As such, having a multiplicity of humanitarian actors – state and non-state – engaging in humanitarian diplomacy through various channels would be useful. However, it is also important to note that this might lead to humanitarian situations where there is an influx of actors on the ground, in turn, complicating response. On the other hand, considering the current overextended state that many in the humanitarian sector find themselves in, this is unlikely to be the case for many responses.

That humanitarian actors be consistently present and willing to talk to any and all stakeholders is crucial in the current trust-scarce landscape, where states are less likely to trust humanitarian organisations and vice versa, where affected populations have less trust in humanitarian actors. Humanitarian diplomacy – engaging stakeholders, strengthening relationships, and building enough credibility to be able to access populations and deliver aid when needed – should be considered a critical tool to overcome the endemic trust challenge in the humanitarian sector.

S. NANTHINI is a Senior Analyst in the Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief Programme at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS).

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